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Global Epistemologies: Concepts, Methodologies, and Data Systems

Economic, Social, and Political Elites in MENA Political Science

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Recent Western literature concerning the political determinants of economic and social outcomes has primarily concentrated on regime types and the effectiveness of state institutions. While this literature has been influential among scholars of and in the Middle East and North Africa, there has also been an emphasis in the region on the interests and networks of economic and political elites—the interactions between rulers, elites, and the broader citizenry—to explain divergent policy outcomes. This is largely due to the inability of dominant mainstream institutional and structural theories to explain much of what has been observed in the region, viewing it as exceptional in its authoritarianism and resistance to global trends. In fact, the seeds for a more sophisticated understanding can be found in the literature on the Arab world that emphasizes relational dynamics between political and economic actors. Synthesizing the insights of scholars of the region has the potential to contribute more broadly to global debates on how political factors and conditions within states shape the quality of life experienced by their residents. Such a shift to viewing regimes as networks provides a useful framework for bridging the broader trends in political science with the work emanating from scholarship on the Middle East and North Africa.

What can social scientists learn from the literature on elite politics emanating from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)? I joined the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies in 2019 as somebody whose work related to the Middle East, but whose epistemological commitments and background rooted him in the traditional generalist work on authoritarian politics to a greater extent than the literature produced by scholars of the region. That first year, I worked on a manuscript that related my nascent thoughts on political networks to the economic outcomes produced by the Syrian regime under Bashar Al-Assad.[1] The core thesis of that work was that the succession led to a change in the elite network that incentivized the nature of the liberalization that Syria underwent, and such liberalization had deleterious effects on the Syrian economy.

Faculty members at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies are regularly invited to give talks at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (Arab Center), and that spring, I was invited to give a talk. The Arab Center has a large number of Syria experts and scholars, and I was fortunate to receive feedback from them that would fundamentally change the way that I would think about the project. To my surprise, the focus on elite identities was not questioned by any of the discussants or audience members. Perhaps the most poignant critique came from Samir Seifan, who immediately accepted the premise that elite preferences were relevant to the liberalization policies that were introduced yet argued that elite interests shifted due to the children of bureaucratic and military/security elites inheriting power. While the differences between his own explanation and mine were subtle, I realized that the greatest threat to my argument was not related to whether there was a shift in the composition of the elites that shaped the nature of the liberalization process, but whether such a shift was fundamentally related to who ruled and the network of confidants that he had built or a broad elite succession process that ushered in a new cohort.

Elite dynamics are at the heart of any authoritarian regime, yet such dynamics often get lost in the analyses of nondemocratic politics when attempting to aggregate data across states and produce generalizable observations. MENA politics' methodological diversity has allowed for novel theorizing in domains where operationalization of concepts can be difficult across contexts. In particular, elite-society and elite-institutional relations have received more attention from scholars of the region than much of the work produced by political scientists studying authoritarian politics. The insights of the body of work produced

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1 A portion of this research has recently been published as a book chapter (see Shamaileh 2022).

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by MENA scholars have the potential to contribute substantially to political science's understanding of how elite dynamics influence the outcomes experienced by authoritarian states.

This essay reflects on the role of elites in shaping political and economic outcomes in the region, and the important position afforded to elites in research conducted by MENA scholars on the region. In emphasizing scholarship on autocratic rule written by scholars who are from or have spent significant time in the region, it is not my intention to elevate it above scholarship from and on other regions or generalist work on authoritarian politics. The purpose of this essay is to simply highlight the region's discussion of elites in shaping politics and what political science can broadly learn from such discussions. Moreover, the essay should not be interpreted as a call to move away from understanding how institutions in the region influence politics and policy outcomes. It is, however, an appeal to take more seriously new institutionalism's fundamental proposition regarding the endogeneity of institutions and how they function, and to understand the role that elites play in shaping the outcomes produced across different institutional contexts.

In my opinion, the discipline's collective knowledge of how elites shape politics can benefit greatly from paying close attention to how scholars studying the MENA region have incorporated elites into their analyses. After broadly exploring the institutional turn in the study of authoritarian politics, this essay highlights some of the ways in which elite dynamics have been utilized to understand the politics of the MENA region. In particular, I argue that this literature can help us better think through separating the effects of institutions from the effects of elite dynamics; better understand how elite preferences, beliefs, and strategies shape policy outcomes; and challenge the normative assumptions associated with our understanding of democratic institutions. Finally, I contend that viewing authoritarian regimes through a network lens can help bridge the literature on elite dynamics with the institutionalist work that dominates the study of authoritarian politics.

THE INSTITUTIONAL TURN IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

While references to elites in contemporary generalist work on authoritarian politics are abundant, elites in most related work operate in the background as a constituency to be manipulated by or within the institutions of the state.[2] In contrast to an earlier literature that centered its focus on elites or incorporated elites directly into their frameworks, much of the scholarship produced over the course of the past two decades has turned to institutional explanations of outcomes (Gandhi 2008; Pepinsky 2014). Rather than treating elite dynamics as an important potential confounder when demonstrating a relationship between institutions and what is produced by a state or as potential core explanatory factor, much of the contemporary work published on the outcomes emanating from nondemocratic regimes relegates elite dynamics to noise. Similarly, while sociologists and institutionalist theorists have taken seriously the role that informal institutions play in shaping policy outcomes, a significant portion of empiricist political scientists and economists have paid only lip service to informal institutions and ideological constraints. In my opinion, contemporary scholars of and from the MENA region have taken more seriously the role of elites and informal institutions in shaping the outcomes produced by institutions.

There are two reasons why the broader discipline needs to take elite dynamics more seriously. First, it is necessary to clearly identify the relevant features of the elite landscape and the independent and conditional influence they exert on the outcomes produced by states in order to understand what the institutions themselves are likely producing. Neither formal nor informal institutions arise spontaneously and completely exogenously. Their creation, influence, and persistence are socially manufactured, and elites often play a fundamental role in shaping and maintaining such institutions (Moore 1996; Skocpol 1979; Przeworski 2004). Therefore, it is difficult to disentangle what is being produced by the institutions and what is being produced by the economic, social, and political elite order. Do authoritarian legislatures constrain rulers and produce better economic outcomes (Wright 2008), or do elite landscapes that tend to promote economic growth also produce more meaningful legislatures in authoritarian regimes?

Second, the formal institutions of authoritarian regimes do not necessarily provide a clear picture of the distribution of power within the state (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018). As I have previously noted, institutional authority often serves to obfuscate where power resides rather than outline how power is shared (Shamaileh 2021). Individuals placed in ostensibly powerful positions may be highly constrained agents with little say over policy in their domains. In addition, the existence of a legislature does not imply that the policy preferences of the regime and heterogeneity in such preferences can be gleaned from authoritarian legislatures. Few would argue that legislatures in highly repressive regimes, such as Assad's Syria, operate as forums for regime elites to debate, but it is questionable whether such legislatures generally express the heterogeneity in regime elite interests in less restrictive contexts either.

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2 For example, Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust's (2009) masterful review of the literature on elections in authoritarian regimes references "elites" or the "elite" forty-seven times, yet the overwhelming majority of these references—and nearly all references that do not engage the Middle East—treat elites as passive or narrow-sighted players. This is particularly true of the treatment of economic and social elites who hold no positions within the regime.

The faceless institutionalist work that pervades the recent authoritarian politics literature is —in my opinion—a product of the related trends toward minimalist conceptualizations and the quantification of the field. I am far from an opponent of either of these trends, but what is being lost in the process must be acknowledged. It is far more difficult to systematically capture variation in elite relations than to quantify constitutional provisions, roll call votes, or election results. Once a subset of elites takes power, it becomes even more difficult to identify the structure of power relations among competing blocs (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 2). Yet it is precisely the structure of elite power relations that institutions are ostensibly meant to regulate. If decisions are not made transparently through the institutions that credibly commit rulers to share power, are the seemingly democratic institutions found in autocratic regimes likely to be the locus of such power-sharing arrangements? Can we fundamentally understand how institutions shape political outcomes without understanding how elite dynamics shape both the outcomes produced and the institutions that arise?

Moreover, where elite dynamics are presumed to play a significant role in shaping outcomes, the elites are most often strategically rational with homogeneous and narrow interests related to either strengthening their position within the regime or improving/protecting their economic standing. The underlying logic for such assumptions—whether explicitly stated or not—is that elites and rulers, having gained significant expertise in the domain of politics, are unconstrained by many of the behavioral and informational limitations that prevent others from fully appreciating the strategic landscapes in front of them. Even if we accept a strategically rational lens, missing from this discussion is the heterogeneity in elite interests and constraints that may have contributed to the construction of the institutions that emerged and the outcomes produced by the state after the adoption of these institutions.

Of course, as with any description of a broad literature, these are generalizations and not absolutes. The generalists studying topics relevant to nondemocratic contexts prior to the most recent institutionalist turn have emphasized the importance of elites in the democratization process, and their thoughts continue to exert influence over the literature (Przeworski 2004; Boix 1998; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). Some recent work has explicitly incorporated elites broadly into their theoretical arguments and empirical analyses, producing poignant insights into the politics of autocratic states (Svolik 2012; Shih 2022; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018; Williamson and Magaloni 2020; Gehlbach and Keefer 2011). In fact, perhaps recognizing the weakness of purely institutional explanation, the authoritarian politics literature has been trending toward more detailed explications of the roles elites play in shaping the politics of authoritarian regimes. Moreover, the persistent references to elites in the contemporary literature highlights their importance in shaping political outcomes, even among works that do not directly account for elite dynamics. Finally, some scholars have also begun to account for pre-institutional elite orders when considering the institutions that they produce and the outcomes of such institutions (Meng and Paine 2022; Wen 2020; Zhang et al. 2021). It is this particular line of inquiry that I believe requires further development and where the MENA politics literature can make a lasting contribution to the field as a whole.

As Adam Przeworski has noted, our intuition tells us that institutions sometimes matter, but the fundamental problem we face as scholars is figuring out how and when (Przeworski 2004). In his own words, "if different institutions are possible only under different conditions, how can we tell whether what matters are institutions or the conditions?" While the institutional turn in the authoritarian politics literature has produced profoundly important insights, it is imperative that the findings of this literature endogenize elite dynamics in a sophisticated manner so as to be able to properly evaluate the root causes of the outcomes produced by different societies.

THE ELITES IN MENA POLITICAL SCIENCE

Current scholarship from and on the MENA region draws significant inspiration from the generation of elite-centered scholarship that preceded the institutional turn. In centering elites, scholarship on the authoritarian politics of the region have to a greater extent problematized the endogeneity of institutions, treated elite dynamics as an important confounder and developed sophisticated understandings of the relationship between elites, their institutions, and the outcomes they produce for their societies. There are a number of reasons that MENA political science may be paying closer attention to elite dynamics. First, difficulty obtaining data that can be quantified has meant that a larger subset of scholars studying the region utilize qualitative methods that allow for deeper probing of their cases. Second, much like the scholars who preceded the institutional turn in the study of authoritarian politics, the fieldwork expected of scholars who work on the region has provided them with the experience in such contexts to understand the nuances and micro-interactions that produce the broader outcomes that we observe. Third, the recent institutionalist work on authoritarian politics has not provided a particularly useful framework for understanding politics in the region. Ultimately, I believe the methodological heterogeneity of MENA scholars has enriched the subfield's understanding of authoritarian politics.

This has led to a number of poignant insights from scholars of the region, not all of which can be dealt with directly. Below, I will highlight three lines of inquiry and their implications for our understanding of authoritarian politics. The first subsection deals head-on with the endogeneity of institutions and how the elite dynamics that shape these institutions continue to exert force after such institutions are in place. Subsequently, the essay will highlight how elite preferences and bargaining may shape the strategic landscape in ways that can be fundamentally more important than the institutional framework that elites operate within. Finally, building on the previous two points, the essay will turn to how elite networks can work to undermine

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political institutions without the evasion or destruction of the very institutions meant to constrain them.

THE SURVIVAL OF MONARCHIES AND THE ENDOGENEITY OF INSTITUTIONS

Perhaps one of the strongest relevant correlations observed during the Arab uprisings was the resilience of monarchies in the face of a wave of protests and political unrest. Of the eight monarchies in the Arab world, only one experienced any meaningful political mobilization by opposition forces, and none were thrust into armed conflict or experienced regime change. This figure stands in stark contrast to the numerous republics that experienced fundamental upheavals of their political orders after 2011. It would have been easy to simply point to institutional differences as the primary driver of regime survival, yet few MENA scholars did.

Nearly immediately, scholars of the region forcefully pushed back against the monarchical advantage narrative by pointing to the endogeneity of the institution itself.[3] It was in such works that scholars appeared to implicitly deal with the endogeneity problem most forcefully. Very early on, Yom and Gause (2012) turned to a strategic argument linking long-run historical trends associated with the elite coalition that formed to support the present monarchs, natural resource endowments, and foreign support as the primary reasons for the persistence of the Arab monarchies prior to the Arab Spring and their resilience during the Arab Spring rather than the institution of monarchy playing a central role in preserving these regimes. Other scholars have further explored the issue empirically, coming to similar conclusions (Bank, Richter, and Sunik 2014, 2014). While monarchical regimes may have provided some institutional advantages during the state-building process and a favorable strategic landscape for rulers to navigate (Anderson 1991), the failure of many monarchs to hold on to power postindependence points to other underlying factors as the root causes of regime survival.

Which elites matter? For Yom and Gause (2012), the focus is on rulers fostering cross- cutting coalitions of elite supporters, yet other work has emphasized the importance of control over military elites. While institutional mechanisms associated with controlling the military may be effective, the primary mechanism of neutralizing elites during the state-formation period was cooptation. Al-Hafizi (2017, 2020) argues rather convincingly that the roots of stability in Morocco may not necessarily be the establishment of a broad coalition of support, but rather the military elite's relationship with the royals and their ability to sidestep entry into politics on behalf of political factions. Similarly, the nature of tribal elite recruitment in Jordan during the state-formation process produced military and bureaucratic elites that were firmly tied to the regime, and it is this process that may have contributed to Jordan's stability (Khazaeli 2013; Tell 2013). Thus, the most appropriate question to ask may not be whether the formation of elite coalitions and elite dynamics are the primary drivers of regime stability, but, rather, which elites need to be coopted, when they can be co-opted, and how.

All regimes co-opt and no ruler rules alone, yet who is brought into the regime and who is incentivized to maintain loyalty to the regime is not dictated by leaders alone. Like rulers in Jordan and Morocco, the monarchs of Iraq attempted to establish broad coalitions of elites to support their rule (Batatu 1978). While British pressure and constraints may have stifled strategic elite recruitment early on and motivated resistance later among the burgeoning educated classes, the complicated, heterogeneous, and swiftly evolving elite networks contributed to the difficulty in developing an effective regime elite coalition (Dodge 2003; Batatu 1978). As the pressures of state formation pushed the regime to recruit broadly from the population to fill the ranks of the burgeoning bureaucracies and officer corps, individuals from across various communities were drawn into the governments' ranks without a clear connection to the network of elites the monarchy had been fostering. Moreover, the upward social mobility brought on by the expansion of education fed the Arab nationalist movement that would find receptive allies within the fractured ranks of a military that acted as a destabilizing force throughout the postcolonial period. Unlike in Jordan, the military in Iraq was not built on the networks of the social elites whom the regime relied on for support; and, unlike in Morocco, the political cleavages that arose did not allow for a stable alliance between the monarchy and the military elites.

Of course, this does not imply that institutions do not shape state building or that monarchs do not enjoy some significant strategic advantages when dealing with opposition forces. As has been demonstrated by others, the institution of monarchy may be particularly well suited for state building, and monarchs may have a number of options available to them that are not available to leaders in republics (Anderson 1991). Nevertheless, any examination of the effects of an institution on regime survival (or policy outcomes) must account for the underlying elite dynamics that led to such institutions and consider what counterfactual institutional settings given the same underlying elite dynamics may have produced.

The scholarship arising from and on the MENA region has largely provided examinations of authoritarian politics that more consistently endogenize elites within their frameworks for understanding the role that institutions play in shaping politics. This careful attention to the interactions between elites, institutions, and contextual factors extends far beyond examinations of monarchical institutions. For example, Bassel Salloukh's (2023) recent study

3 While few from within the MENA political science community advanced an institutional explanation, outside of the MENA politics community, some did forcefully argue that a royal advantage explains the resilience of monarchies. Menaldo (2012) makes this argument fairly explicitly, yet even here he considers long-run elite dynamics and the advantages monarchs have when attempting to co-opt elites.

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explores how consociationalism was instrumentalized by elites in Lebanon for state capture and solidified vertical clientelistic relationships between elites and their constituents. While the institution of consociationalism plays a role in shaping the outcomes of state building and rebuilding, it does not exert influence that is independent of elite dynamics. This attention to the relationship between elites and the institutions they create or maintain is characteristic of the scholarship produced by MENA scholars who have both a firm grasp of the broader literature in the field and deep contextual knowledge.

ELITE PREFERENCES, STRATEGIES, AND DIVISIONS

Much of the literature on authoritarian politics in the region has taken a greater interest in the preferences and strategies adopted by specific elite actors. In his influential book, *The Past Decade in Syria: The Dialectic of Stagnation and Reform*, Mohamed Jamal Barout (2011) provides a detailed examination of both the policies that were set in motion and the debates within the regime surrounding economic liberalization under Bashar Al-Assad. While there is plenty of discussion of elite preferences and somewhat transparent negotiations of Syrian economic policy, what is notably missing from his discussion is any evidence that the institutions meant to shape such policies or act as a forum for elite bargaining actually played such a role. Elites formulated strong, even if poorly defined, positions, and Barout depicts three rival camps of regime insiders arguing for different sets of policies: liberalization, developmental reform, and corrective measures. Others have similarly described contestation over reforms in Syria during this period of time, albeit presenting them in a somewhat more favorable light (Seifan 2010). Ultimately, none of these three camps could have been satisfied with the result. The plan that was produced provided for a transition to a social market economy, yet this plan faltered as the liberalization process was set aside in favor of an ad hoc liberalization masked as social market reforms (Barout 2011). The beneficiaries of these reforms were a narrow set of emerging economic powers firmly tied to Assad as the regime underwent the process of authoritarian upgrading (Barout 2011; Abboud 2013; Heydemann 2007).

What can be gleaned from the overarching story of Syria's liberalization process under Bashar Al-Assad? First, the distribution of power shifted among elites prior to any fundamental institutional changes taking place (Shamaileh 2022).[4] This was in part due to an aging ruling elite giving way to a younger generation drawn from different segments of the regime's elite network and the rise of a younger leader who was more closely connected to these new actors operating outside of the state's military and bureaucracies. Second, different elite cohorts may have vastly different interests, particularly when drawn from an expansive network of military and bureaucratic officials. The "old guard" is likely to have statist preferences that clash with the interests of burgeoning elites, who are more likely to be educated and cosmopolitan and who have a direct interest in the private sphere. Third, the institutional mechanisms meant to organize intraregime bargaining may not play their intended role when the structure of power within the regime is not observable even to insiders. Beyond authoritarian politics being opaque to scholars and citizens, even those on the inside of regimes likely do not fully see or understand how decisions are made. Those involved in negotiating and planning a path toward reform had every reason to believe that their recommendations would be heard. Assad had clearly signaled his interest in reform, and they were well positioned within the regime to recommend such changes. Ultimately, the decisions that were made during the five years after the 2005 meeting of the Regional Congress reflected the narrow set of elites who were not direct participants in producing policy and were not formally part of the government producing such policies.[5] The local scholarship on elite politics helps highlight the nature of elite divisions, and this allows us to subsequently understand the nature of such divisions and which elites are playing a dominant role in shaping policy.

The MENA politics literature moves beyond highlighting elite divisions and how they map onto policy outcomes, theorizing as to how elite preferences and actions influence regime stability. Some scholars have focused on how the preferences of elites influenced the outcomes observed during the Arab uprisings. One prerequisite for prodemocracy revolutions to succeed may be a broad elite political culture that is amenable to democratization (Bishara 2021). Moreover, using a marketplace logic, scholars from the region have argued that divisions between the ruling elite and local elites may have led to a sort of market failure that created the conditions that would allow for regime change to take place (Lahmar 2021). Rather than elite behavior and preferences simply influencing whether democracy can be maintained, these scholars present compelling evidence that elites may play a fundamental role in creating conditions that are favorable for democratic transitions.

Discussions of elite interests do not simply revolve around domestic politics or the preferences of elites, but also delve into the transnational relationships formed between elites and foreign states and substate actors. For example, recent work has emphasized the strategic decisions made by the Qatari ruling elite that allowed them not only to capitalize on new technologies to strengthen their re-

4 Of course, the Tenth Regional Congress introduced meaningful institutional changes that reduced the strength of the party.

5 It should be noted that many of these economic elites were either related to individuals who were part of the government, defined broadly, or closely linked to direct participants in the regime. The primary points are (a) that the institutions themselves did not credibly commit the regime to any sort of policy and (b) the elites sitting at the table extended well beyond those formally sitting at the table.

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gional position, but also to fundamentally alter the strategic landscape (Kabalan 2017, 2021). Interestingly, Kabalan argues that Qatar has managed to establish its foreign policy independence, emphasizing the role of elites in actively cultivating it. While Kabalan's work provides the underlying logic for strategic decisions made by the ruling elites that are in the interest of their state, the literature is also replete with examples of elites forming bonds with foreign states to protect their own domestic interests.

Perhaps more relevant to this immediate discussion is the literature that explores how elites form bonds with foreign actors and states to strengthen their position domestically. The role that foreign actors and groups can play in influencing civil wars has received significant attention from the broader political science community (Regan 2000). What has received less attention has been the persistent effects of these relationships after the war. It is in the scholarship on Lebanon where we have seen significant engagement with both nuances of the relationships that formed between elites and foreign benefactors and the deleterious effects of such relationships on postwar outcomes (Hourani 2015; Leenders 2015; Najem 2012; Hinnebusch 1998). Moreover, the scholarship on Syria, both past and present, shines a light on the heterogeneous cultivation of ties with foreign states by elites both in peace and during war (Barout 2011; Daher 2020; Shamaileh, Aloskan, and Zahr 2022). While these are just two contexts, the weakness of states in the region may have fostered an environment ripe for the cultivation of ties between both national and local elites with foreign actors (Zeggagh and Hemchi 2022). Such dynamics have implications for our understanding of transnational elite relations beyond the MENA region.

Finally, there is no paucity of scholarship in the broader political science literature on the importance of elites in shaping identities. Nevertheless, the primordial and essentialist nature with which certain identities have been depicted continues to resonate. The scholarship on and from the region has persistently challenged essentialist conceptualizations of sects and sectarianism. Moreover, much of this literature has emphasized the role that elites play in shaping such identities. Azmi Bishara's (2022) recently translated book, *Sectarianism without Sects*, places elites in a central position in producing sectarianism. Rather than viewing such groups as persistently present but increasing and decreasing in salience, he views these as imagined communities, highlighting the ideational nature of such identities. Other scholars have also pointed to elite-society relations in shaping sectarian identification, often emphasizing the material interests that produce such identities (Majed 2017; Satik 2013).[6] As the broader field of political science begins to take seriously the notion that identities are not static (Egan 2020), the scholarship originating from MENA researchers has the potential to significantly contribute to the field's understanding of how elites shape such identities.

LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS WITHOUT DEMOCRATIC OUTCOMES

If we use an expansive definition of institutional liberal democracy that does not explicitly exclude consociational regimes, Lebanon is a liberal democracy. This simple, controversial statement is likely to elicit a wide range of responses that are on average negative. In fact, I doubt many would agree with this characterization of the Lebanese regime. Freedom House's 2022 report gives Lebanon a score of 42 out of 100 on its Global Freedom Index, which is widely used as a measure of democracy (Freedom House 2022). Rooted in a substantive and expansive notion of democracy, the measure covers both institutional and non-institutional dimensions of states. Interestingly, the same report gives Hungary a score of 69. Hungary under Orban has manipulated the electoral system to prevent serious challenges to his party, consolidated control over the media, and launched xenophobic campaigns against immigrants. Lebanon has witnessed transitions in power between competing factions, has a diverse media representing these competing factions, and is a per capita world leader in hosting refugees. Probing the Freedom House survey shines a light on the numerous inconsistencies in how countries are coded. For example, Lebanese factions that are outside of the winning bloc are not treated as the opposition, whereas such parties are considered opposition in other contexts. Moreover, while interparty cooperation and coalition building are treated negatively in Lebanon, they are either discussed positively or do not appear to factor into the scores of other states. Without belaboring the point, any logically coherent and empirically consistent measure of liberal democracy that does not exclude corporatist consociational systems, such as the Freedom House index, should rate Lebanon fairly high.[7]

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6 In addition, El Amine and Mazur (2022) conceptualize groups through their social networks, arguing that it allows for a conceptually coherent meso categorization of such groups without relying on essentialist assumptions. Aside from being a coherent and thoughtful way of conceptualizing groups, such as sects, it has the potential to inspire novel meso level measurements associated with groups.

7 In my view, there is no inherent conflict between corporate consociationalism and liberalism. Most discussions of liberal democracy in isolation do not define it in such a way as to exclude consociational regimes. It is only where consociationalism is discussed explicitly that the requirement that liberalism be narrowed to regimes where salient political identities arise endogenously within the electoral institutions becomes a requirement. If we were to exclude consociational systems, it would require us to reexamine more broadly the relationship between quotas and liberalism. Do gender and youth quotas or reserved seats for minority groups diminish the degree to which a regime can be categorized as liberal? Of course, this is likely a minority view, and one that is not necessary to accept the premise that many, if not most, definitions of liberal democracy that are presented in the broader literature do not conceptually exclude consociational systems.

None of the above implies that Lebanon is in any sense a politically, economically, or socially egalitarian polity, or that deep problems with the electoral, political, and judicial institutions do not exist. However, it does imply that if we are to presume that the apparent equilibrium that has been reached in Lebanon has produced devastating outcomes for Lebanese citizens—a premise I am completely willing to accept—unfavorable political equilibria can exist in institutionally liberal democratic contexts. Thus, a liberal democratic paradigm can systematically and consistently produce negative political outcomes for its citizens given certain social and economic conditions.[8]

If Lebanon is a democracy, why does it produce outcomes that are seemingly undemocratic? Are consociational elements of its political framework and sectarianism to blame? Perhaps to some extent, but these factors alone cannot explain the outcomes experienced in Lebanon. While corporatist consociation may have numerous disadvantages and be premised on unjustifiable grounds, its electoral mechanisms should encourage greater competition among parties and elites for votes across sectarian lines (see Cammet and Issar 2010). Sectarian polarization may also have deleterious effects on intergroup cooperation (Majed 2021) but in isolation would merely represent a social cleavage around which parties organize and compete. Moreover, there is no fundamentally unique quality to sectarian identification that distinguishes it from many other identity groups. It is my contention that it is the drastic asymmetries in social and economic power within sectarian groups that produced the current institutional framework, the social fragmentation along sectarian lines, and the outcomes that have benefited elites at the expense of the broader citizenry.

This contention is not born out of thin air or my own novel research on the matter. It is the product of decades of research by scholars of the MENA region on postwar Lebanon who have paid careful attention to elite-society relations and have integrated this knowledge with their understanding of Lebanese political institutions. Foreign coercion and elite bargaining produced the Taif Agreement, which reformulated the confessional institutional framework and helped entrench the sectarian elites within the political domain (El-Husseini 2012). While some of the broader scholarship on consociationalism has focused on extremism and group favoritism and viewed the constituents of such elites as the primary constraints pushing elites for corporatist agreements to resolve conflict (McCulloch 2014), the scholarship on Lebanon has focused on the vertical relationships between elites and citizens and the constraints placed on citizens that tie them to such elites (Salloukh and Verheij 2017; Mansour and Khatib 2021). Rather than strong, salient group identities necessarily binding leaders to a corporatist consociational agreement, such dynamics can produce incentives for elites to prefer corporatist arrangements knowing that there are strong material constraints binding members of their group to them and limiting challengers from arising (Salloukh et al. 2015). Within such a context, consociational arrangements can be counterrevolutionary, yet they are merely tools that help preserve and expand entrenched elite power rather than the primary source of such power (Halawi 2020; Hermez 2011). These power-sharing institutions thus produce elite agreements on the distribution of resources and positions to groups that are economically hierarchically organized, limiting challengers from within such groups arising and keeping cross-group cooperation from succeeding. A bloated public sector becomes one of the feeding grounds for the clientelistic ties that govern elite-society relations (Salloukh 2019). Increasingly taking a greater share of the rents of the state, their economic power and resolve to maintain the current paradigm strengthens (Assouad 2023).

While the fuzzy boundaries of sectarian groups partially define these hierarchical relationships, they are only one dimension that shapes elite-society relations. Geography, historical bonds, and economic interests also shape the relationship between elites and their constituents (Traboulsi 2012). Thus, while politics is often demarcated by sectarian divisions, intrasectarian divisions arise and shape the nature of the sectarian divisions that characterize politics in Lebanon. As such, the salience of particular sectarian identities has fluctuated while the position of the elites has remained remarkably stable, even while navigating waves of explicitly anti-elite, antisectarian protests.

It is this persistent domination of politics by the same stagnant set of elite interests in the face of overwhelming disapproval from their constituents that leaves both experts and casual observers wary of overemphasizing the democratic, let alone liberal, nature of the regime. It is perhaps for this reason that scholars of Lebanon have pointed to the absence of participatory democracy and the highly authoritarian outcomes that the context has produced. Yet the roots of this stagnation are not institutional. The stagnation is rooted in the nature of the social and economic networks that arose over time and constructed the elites, who have in turn manufactured and manipulated institutions to reinforce their position within such networks (Salloukh et al. 2015).[9]

The authoritarian outcomes that have been observed were produced in a broadly liberal democratic institutional setting that provides the openness for political mobilization and organization and the electoral mechanisms for

8 It is important to note that this does not in any way imply that liberal democracy is not favorable to many other frameworks.

9 N. B. Anderson (2016) notes that the lack of legitimacy of political institutions in the region led many to seek support from other preexisting mechanisms for redress. It stands to reason, then, that if the primary alternative to the state are the sectarian elites connected to an individual's community, the individual will turn to them rather than the institutions themselves. As such, the elites who control the state may have a vested interest in undermining that state's legitimacy in order to maintain their clientelistic relationships with their constituents.

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shaping who governs. In addition, as has been learned from Iraq, a shift from corporate to liberal consociation—imagining it was viable—will not necessarily provide for more democratic outcomes. Thus, the core normative implication of this contention is that if institutional remedies are a viable tool for moving Lebanon from elite domination, they must fundamentally reshape the social networks and distribution of economic power that have preserved elite domination over Lebanese politics. Moreover, the insights gleaned from the Lebanese context have the potential to fundamentally reshape our understanding of how the social and economic order of a state can fundamentally undermine institutional frameworks that could theoretically distribute power broadly to citizens. The outcomes observed in Lebanon are not simply the product of its consociational institutional framework but, rather, the manipulation of such institutions within a context dominated by hierarchical and sectarian social networks.

THE PATH FORWARD: FROM ELITES TO NETWORKS

Although this essay may read as a nostalgic call to rewind the discipline to a bygone era where leading scholars really understood the politics of nondemocratic regimes, it is not.[10] As Barry Weingast (1997) has noted, formal institutions, elites, and citizens all shape political outcomes. Thus, the goal should be not to set aside the knowledge of nondemocratic institutions that we have gained over the past two decades, but to find a way to bridge the trends in examining elite dynamics in MENA politics with the institutional literature that has dominated generalist work in recent years. There are numerous, heterogeneous approaches to doing this that range from the "Bourdieusian" to the historical sociological to the formal theoretic (Dodge 2020; Saouli and Hinnebusch 2021; Awad 2022; Svolik 2012). In my opinion, the most appealing lens from which to view nondemocratic regimes combines the insights of contemporary institutionalist and elite- centric work by viewing them as networks.

Scholars of the Arab world have dedicated significant energy to understanding the disparate networks that help regimes remain in power (Haddad 2011; Heydemann 2004; Mazur 2022). Such works have provided us with a profound understanding of the role that networks play in shaping regimes and preserving their power. Extending this line of inquiry in a manner that reconceptualizes regimes as networks may allow scholars to connect the social, economic, and structural political order within a coherent framework (Shamaileh 2021). While this does represent a modest ontological shift in our understanding of regimes, the broad range of scholars from the region working on both the regime's networks and elite politics more broadly have already implicitly accepted some of the underlying assumptions of the network framework in their analyses. As such, it is a relatively minor leap from the current conceptualizations utilized by MENA scholars. Explicitly adopting and extending the network framework to the regime itself would allow scholars to incorporate social, economic, and institutional factors into one framework while also problematizing elite formation and reformation itself. While the inherent value of a network approach to understanding regimes is more readily apparent when considering nondemocratic institutional contexts, its value where democratic institutions are present can be gleaned from the role that such networks play in shaping the authoritarian outcomes produced by Lebanon's democratic system.

Whether through the use of a network framework or some other theoretical lens, the insights of MENA scholars on elite politics have the potential to enrich the broader political science literature. The methodological heterogeneity of MENA politics has provided avenues of profound theoretical development in the study of elite politics. Combining these insights with those of the contemporary institutional authoritarian politics literature may lead to contributions that fundamentally reshape our understanding of politics. At the very least, integrating these insights into examinations of the effects of institutions on the outcomes produced by states will help the discipline design more rigorous tests of the effects of institutions.

COMPETING INTERESTS

I state that no competing interests exist.

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10 While the personal experiences of scholars such as Guillermo O'Donnell and Adam Przeworski may have provided them with an innate understanding of the micro-foundations of authoritarian rule that helped recognize which lines of inquiry were most plausible, those who have experienced authoritarian politics hold no monopoly on such understanding.

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