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HNRS Research and Exhibition

12 December 2018

An Unexplained Explanation: Culture’s Influence on Monarchy in the Arab World

**Abstract**

The Arab Spring (2010-2012) highlighted the durability of Arab monarchies and the fragility of Arab republics. Each of the eight monarchies survived, and all but Bahrain experienced significantly lower levels of unrest than the Arab republics. To illustrate, republics such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen experienced tumultuous regime change; Libya experienced a civil war; the Arab monarchies experienced none of the above. This transpired within the broader context of a region that has a curiously high concentration of absolute or near-absolute monarchies in a world in which the vast majority of nations are governed by republics or constitutional monarchies. Many explanations have been proposed for this phenomenon. One of them is the cultural explanation. However, it has not been given serious consideration in the literature, whereas the other explanations have been routinely touched on. In this research proposal, I present a plan to empirically investigate the cultural explanation for the persistence of monarchy in the Arab world.

**The Oddity of Arab Monarchy**

Few monarchies remain today. In the Arab world there are eight such monarchies. Furthermore, every monarchical regime in the Arab world survived the Arab Spring (2010-2012). Contrast this with the events that took place within nearby authoritarian republics, such as Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, whose regimes were overthrown. Monarchies fared better than republics. An already unusual situation in which one region has the highest concentration of absolute monarchies has become more puzzling by these regimes’ astounding durability. I attempt to investigate the factors behind such a peculiar persistence of monarchy in the Arab world.

The current body of research attempts to explain this phenomenon with different explanations. One of them is the cultural explanation, which is defined as that which emphasizes aspects of Arab culture that are resistant to Western liberal democracy (Bona 2015, 275). However, the literature has not given cultural explanation nearly as much attention as the other main explanations. Providing empirical support or rejection of this cultural explanation would be a beneficial contribution to the discourse on monarchical persistence in the Arab world.

**Investigating the Cultural Explanation**

Cultural attitudes are powerful in influencing the development of political thought and the formation of political systems. The role of cultural attitudes is an important factor to be considered in researching the phenomenon of monarchical persistence in the Arab world, but the as previously mentioned, current literature has nothing to show for when it comes to empirical study of this topic. I want to determine if there is a relationship between cultural attitudes and the persistence of monarchy. Specifically, I attempt to answer the question, what is the relationship between attitudes towards authoritarian leadership and democratic governance and the presence of monarchy in Arab countries?

**Defining Key Concepts**

I place attitudes towards authoritarian leadership and democratic governance under the umbrella of the term “cultural attitudes.” Mhabeni Bono explains the cultural explanation to be that which emphasizes aspects of Arab culture that are resistant to Western liberal democracy (Bona 2015, 275). In this case, “cultural attitudes” will be defined as those attitudes expressed by residents of Arab nations which are resistant to Western liberal democracy. Specifically, I will study how respondents from Arab monarchies and republics perceive authoritarian leadership and democratic governance. Having a positive perception of authoritarian leadership and a negative perception of democratic governance would go against what is valued by Western liberal democracy. To operationalize these terms, I will be using data from sixth edition of *World Values Survey* (2010-2014).

**Utilization of the *World Values Survey***

As stated, I will use data from the *World Values Survey* (2010-2014). Specifically, I will focus on two questions asked in the survey. The first question follows: “I’m going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country? Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections” (*World Values Survey* 2014, 277). The second is the same, except the respondent is asked to rate “having a democratic political system” (283). Giving the former political system a favorable rating and the latter, a negative rating would go against what is valued by Western liberal democracy.

To preface, I do not expect my research to take more than two months to complete. I have already written a literature review and a research design. I do not expect to have to pay for anything to conduct my analysis, as I already have free access to statistical analysis program and the data I need. I expect my research to be published as a political science research article.

**Sampling Methods of the *World Values Survey* (2010-2014)**

It is worth noting the sampling methods used in the most recent round of the *World Values Survey*. For each country, the sampling frame included the national population, both sexes, and people at least 18 years old. Sample sizes differ, with 1200 people being sampled in Iraq, Jordan, and Morocco, 1205 sampled in Tunisia, 1000 sampled in Yemen, and 1303 sampled in Kuwait. The margins of error also vary: 2.9% for Iraq, Tunisia, Jordan, and Morocco, 3.2% for Yemen, and 2.8% for Kuwait. In Iraq, a cluster sample was used, wherein each governorate was divided into regions, then blocks, streets, and finally, households. In Tunisia, a cluster sample was also used, with the following breakdown: region, governorate, delegation, imada (ad division of a delegation), and then household. In Yemen and Jordan, similar procedures were used. There is no information available on what kind of sample method was utilized in Kuwait.

**Proposed Research Design**

I will focus on data collected in three Arab republics and three Arab monarchies. I will use a small-n, most similar systems design. I study the following countries because of their cultural and geographical similarities, and their key difference: regime type. I choose “region” as a similarity because there is such a stark difference in durability of regime type contained within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) – another way of labeling the Arab world – that I felt compelled to include it in the design. I also choose “religion” because the literature has shown that religious cleavages are an effective predictor of voting behavior. (Manza and Wright 2003, 297). I also employ it as a similarity because if religion is a major factor in how one participates politically, then choosing countries with the same majority religion but different regime types would highlight any significant differences in response to the questions asked in the *World Values Survey*. The information contained in the following table can be found in *The World Factbook* published by the United States Central Intelligence Agency.

*Table 1*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Country** | **Region** | **Majority Religion** | **Regime type** |
| Libya | MENA | Islam | Republic |
| Tunisia | MENA | Islam | Republic |
| Yemen | MENA | Islam | Republic |
| Jordan | MENA | Islam | Monarchy |
| Kuwait | MENA | Islam | Monarchy |
| Morocco | MENA | Islam | Monarchy |

**Proposed Analysis**

I employ “country” as my independent variable, and “rating of authoritarian leadership” and “rating of a democratic political system” as my dependent variables. My unit of analysis is “country.” I will use the data presented in the sixth edition of the *World Values Survey* report to determine if respondents from Arab monarchies rated authoritarian leadership higher than those from Arab republics, and if those of Arab monarchies rate a democratic political system lower than those of Arab republics. I also want to ascertain if there is a causal relationship between my independent variable and dependent variables to explain such a difference in ratings. I expect that respondents from Arab monarchies will (H1) rate authoritarian leadership higher and (H2) the democratic political system lower than respondents from Arab republics. The results of my tests would provide valuable contribution to the discourse on Arab monarchical persistence; particularly, it will help clarify the cultural explanation for this phenomenon.

**Conclusion**

There is a lack of statistical study available on the cultural explanation of the persistence of monarchy in the Arab world. I acknowledge that there are shortcomings to studying this using data from only one study. However, it is worth remembering that the sixth edition of the *World Values Survey* uses data that was collected right before, during, and immediately after the Arab Spring. Isolating this important time frame would give us a clearer picture of what citizens of Arab nations were thinking when a major stress test of regime durability was occurring. In addition, I would like to clarify that my aim is to provide a preliminary answer to a research question which I desire to be answered by other scholars in a collective endeavor to build a theory to explain the persistence of monarchy in the Arab world. Such a theory would be of use to political scientists, who could study it in conversation with other theories related to politics, culture, and revolution, and foreign policy analysts looking to better understand the politics of the Arab world. The lack of analysis of the cultural explanation poses an academic problem that is waiting to be solved. Hopefully, the research I conduct will produce an answer and lead to more fruitful discourses in the future.

References

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