



Arab Elites

Negotiating the Politics of Change

The recent deaths of four long-term heads of state in the Arab world heralded important political changes. Shedding light on these changes Perthes explores in his book "Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change" the attitudes and agendas of the new leadership emerging throughout the region. By Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

Volker Perthes and his nine co-authors consider above all the "politically relevant elite" in their studies of eight countries. He argues that the leadership of the Arab world went through a major change at the turn of the millennium. The clearest indication of this change, he says, was the death of four heads of state: King Husain of Jordan, King Hasan of Morocco, Emir Isa of Bahrain and President Hafiz al-Asad of Syria.

Since then two other leaders have left the stage: President Saddam Hussain of Iraq and the Chairman of the Palestinian Authority, Yasir Arafat. There has indeed been a handover of supreme power from one generation to another in the Arab world. The generation born between 1927 and 1937 has given up the sceptre.

And the power has jumped a generation; the new rulers were born in the fifties, two or three decades later than their predecessors. This change at the tip of the pyramid has had an impact all the way down the structure.

The "politically relevant elite"

Perthes, head of the Middle East Research Unit at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin, and his nine co-authors consider above all the "politically relevant elite" in their studies of eight countries.

This elite includes all those who have political influence, who make strategic decisions or who define terms and values in the national debate. Among them, says Perthes in his introduction, are also included temporary and functional elites who exercise political power and influence within the state structures.

This is where the reader might raise several objections to the whole concept of the book. The first objection might relate to the term "politically relevant elite." Who is doing the defining? That's not clear.

Such a definition could be made from the point of view of the ruling regime, or of the parliamentary or extra-parliamentary opposition, of friendly or unfriendly clans in a neighbouring country or of the power supporting the regime from outside the Arab world. This alone shows how hard it is to judge their real relevance.

Arab elites and democratic reforms

The second objection might relate to the question of the role and function of the elite. In the context of the "Arab spring" which has seen democratic initiatives in Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt and on the Arab peninsula, it looks as if the elites neither control the debate nor are they the decisive actors. Isn't it rather the play between individual personalities and the wide masses which is making history there?

The third objection against this book and its concept of elites stems from the fact that the traditional research on elites in the west has emerged from centuries of development which have been led from within and have had their own internal dynamic. The development in the West has organic roots.

The Arab world since 1800 has seen a totally different development, led from outside and un-organic, with an elite which is as varied and heterogeneous as the patchwork society from which it emerges.

On the one hand, elites have been sucked into the West in a kind of brain drain, on the other hand the elite has gone through several socialisations, including the secular military and study in West European and East European centres.

This hybrid elite often had only a marginal influence on the policies at the top. This made it possible for individual rulers to behave as they wanted, which is what has often led to resistance from Islamists. Volker Perthes is aware of that; he refers to factors like origin, structure, position, generation and perspective.

But on the whole his approach remains methodically unfocussed. Above all, he is unable to explain what his special point amounts to, which the individual case studies can then fill out or contradict.

Empirical analysis of the case studies

The first chapter deals with three countries where power has already changed hands. André Bank and Oliver Schlumberger consider Jordan, Saloua Zerhouni takes on Morocco and Volker Perthes analyses Syria.

The second chapter looks at two countries in which successors are already in waiting; Gamal Abdelnasser deals with Egypt, Iris Glosemeyer with Saudi-Arabia. The third chapter examines how systems maintain their power and the role of elites; here Isabelle Werenfels deals with Algeria, and Steffen Erdle with Tunisia.

Four considers how elites have changed under outside dominance; Rola el-Hussaini looks at Lebanon, Hans-Joachim Rabe at the Palestinian territories. Volker Perthes draws conclusions in Chapter Five.

The bibliography, unlike the chapters themselves, is notable for its failure to include Arabic literature, as if there were no debate on elites in Arabic, no strategic reports and no case studies.

The studies of individual countries are highly successful, with Morocco, Egypt and Algeria outstanding. However, Perthes' conclusions are too general and don't succeed in summarising what has been learnt from the case studies.

These though are good enough on their own, and they will certainly give a new and fruitful boost to the discourse about the specificities of the Arab elites.

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