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### Not Always About The Money: Examining Modernization's Role in Democratization

India and the Middle East prove to be two of the most intriguing case studies in comparative politics. India is relatively underdeveloped but has been a democracy for most of its existence. This is usually a contradiction, as underdeveloped economies tend to be more authoritarian or totalitarian rather than stable democracies. Moreover, many Middle Eastern countries are the opposite: well-developed, but authoritarian. This is a contradiction for the opposite reason; more well-developed countries are more likely democracies. Because of these two trends, the modernization school argues that the more developed a country is, the more democratic it will be. However, it would not be entirely appropriate to assume that a country's economic development is the largest factor in its transition to democracy, for institutions and the leaders surrounding the nation also play a significant role.

In comparative politics, the modernization school argues that economic development allows for political development, and by extension, democracy.<sup>1</sup> It argues that because the people have more money, are more urbanized, and are more educated, it is easier to organize and force change. However, this approach also gives relatively mechanistic standards and leaves out other options. For instance, it does not account for a strong leader or strong social forces. While modernization has its arguments, it ultimately fails to fully account for democratization in all cases, such as India's democratization and the Middle East's persisting authoritarianism.

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<sup>1</sup> Barrington Moore, "The Democratic Route to Modern Society," in *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1967), 419.

Because the modernization school fails to account for all cases, multiple approaches have been considered in opposition to it. One of these is the leadership approach, in which Seymour Martin Lipset argues that if there is not a charismatic leader with moderation, the nation cannot be a stable democracy.<sup>2</sup> To prove this, he utilizes the United States as a case study and argues that George Washington used his charisma and moderation to legitimize the United States after its founding.<sup>3</sup> Another approach is the institutional approach, which regards the structures in place before democratization such as elections or self-government. It argues that without these structures, a culture of moderation, cooperation, and bargaining cannot develop.<sup>4</sup> Both of these contradict the modernization school's argument, for the wealth of a country is not the main driving force behind democracy for these approaches. Moreover, both play a much larger role than the modernization school in the democratization of India and the lack of democracy in the Middle East for the same reason: money does not always matter when examining democratization.

India, if considered solely through the modernization school's lens, would not make sense. It is by no means economically developed, yet save for eighteen months between 1975 and 1977, it has been democratic since its independence. Here, the modernization school argues that the Indian National Congress was founded by the educated middle class, and it fought for democracy the most.<sup>5</sup> However, this does not entirely fit in with India's independence, for it gained independence in the 1940s. This is also after the Congress's transformation in the 1920s into a party of the people, much of which was led by one Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>6</sup> The leadership

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<sup>2</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, "George Washington and the Founding of Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 4 (1998): 26-30.

<sup>3</sup> Lipset, "George Washington", 27.

<sup>4</sup> Larry Diamond, "Theories of Political Culture and Democracy," in *Political Culture and Democracy*, n.d., 10-15.

<sup>5</sup> Ashutosh Varshney, "India Defies the Odds: Why Democracy Survives," *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 3 (1998): 39.

<sup>6</sup> Varshney, "India Defies", 39.

approach offers an alternative explanation to the modernization school in this area, for Gandhi and Nehru were vital leaders in the independence and stabilization of India as a democracy.<sup>7</sup> These two leaders helped make democracy succeed and maintain in India, and the INC was not entirely a party of elites at the time of independence. However, the modernization school also argues that the “Green Revolution” made agriculture more efficient, thus bypassing the need for industrialization in this case, as the peasants would be marginally wealthier.<sup>8</sup> However, this is in contradiction to India's per capita GDP of just \$619 in 1950, a few years after India's independence.<sup>9</sup> Simply put, the modernization school does not characterize a GDP this low as likely to turn democratic, hence giving India the characterization of a “Democratic Overachiever.” If the modernization school was to be a set of guidelines, the guidelines would certainly fail for India.

However, another approach explains India's democratization more clearly: the institutionalist approach. Two of the clearest ways this approach is illustrated are through the spread of information and the proto-democratic institutions in the nation before independence. Today, there are around 1,400 different newspapers and nearly 20,000 other news publications in India, making information very widespread.<sup>10</sup> Unrestricted and widely available information is crucial to democracy, for it holds the government accountable. Aside from that, there have been elections, representation, and even self-government in India before it became an independent nation.<sup>11</sup> Hence, it is clear that the modernization school fails in India, and the institutions in place before India's independence affect India's democratization the most.

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<sup>7</sup> For Nehru-Varshney, “India Defies”, 42.

For Gandhi-Richard Sissons, “2: Culture and Democratization in India,” n.d., 46.

<sup>8</sup> Varshney, “India Defies”, 41-42.

<sup>9</sup> Maya Tudor, “Explaining Democracy's Origins: Lessons from South Asia,” *Comparative Politics* 45, no. 3 (2013): 256.

<sup>10</sup> Sissons, “2: Culture”, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Sissons, “2: Culture”, 39-45.

While India defies the modernization school by being relatively poor and going democratic, the Middle East does the opposite: in some spots in the region, the country is wealthy, but it has remained authoritarian. For these rich but still authoritarian countries, the modernization's school main argument is that the source of income and its distribution would keep these nations authoritarian. For instance, Michael Ross argues that the countries that are oil-rich and get external rents remain authoritarian because the wealth goes to the rulers, who use it to lower taxes or give more money to the people, making them less resistant to authoritarian rule.<sup>12</sup> This argument is countered by the institutionalist approach, which argues that the money goes towards the state's coercive apparatus, which in turn suppresses the population.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the institutionalist school provides an interpretation of why Tunisia and Egypt successfully overthrew their leaders in the Arab Spring while many other nations did not; the coercive apparatus decided to side with the people rather than the government in those two cases.<sup>14</sup> This is in addition to the leadership approach's thoughts on Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring. Because Tunisia had effective leadership, the nation turned democratic, and because Egypt did not, it remained authoritarian.<sup>15</sup> Hence, while the leadership and institutional approaches do not explain the Middle East's authoritarianism by themselves, they both provide insights into the matter and effectively counteract the modernization approach's claim that the government's use of money is enough to quiet discontent.

However, this is not the sole claim Ross makes regarding modernization in the Middle East and North Africa. Ross also argues that the modernization approach does apply here because the money gained is not going towards the education of the people, which hinders

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<sup>12</sup> Michael L. Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?," *World Politics* 53, no. 3 (2001): 332-35.

<sup>13</sup> Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (2004): 144-47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4150140>.

<sup>14</sup> Eva Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring," *Comparative Politics* 44, no. 2 (2012): 131.

<sup>15</sup> Bellin, "Reconsidering", 137-38.

economic development.<sup>16</sup> This generally conflicts with the modernization approach, for it argues that if a country has more money, it will get more education. Barrington Moore even goes to disregard education, writing: “no doubt the education system plays an important part, though by itself it could scarcely be decisive.”<sup>17</sup> Education on its own is more or less irrelevant to democratization, Moore argues, so this should not be the determining factor of democratization. Thus, Ross’s claim about education is in contrast with Moore’s thoughts on education, so it should not be taken into consideration when examining the Middle East’s authoritarianism.

Due to India’s transition towards democracy and the Middle East’s remaining authoritarianism, it can be concluded that a country’s economic development is likely not the largest factor in its democratization. The modernization approach’s simplicity is its downfall. However, that does not mean the modernization school should be disregarded in its entirety, for it is important to consider while examining democratization. The leadership approach is also important, for it gives a more direct explanation for democratization via a charismatic but moderate leader. It also does not fully explain democratization, though, for it has a narrow focus and is also simplistic. The institutional approach assists in explaining how the structures are suited for democratization, but it falls short of explaining the turning point for democratization. Hence, all three of these must be taken into consideration when determining countries’ different systems. Using India and the Middle East are exceptionally useful in this regard, for they provide unique cases in which to test these schools of thought in. Therefore, we can modify and change how each school of thought influences each case.

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<sup>16</sup> Ross, “Oil Hinder”, 336-37.

<sup>17</sup> Moore, “The Democratic Route”, 425.

## NOTES

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