The Liberal Project: East and West

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Roger D Congleton, *Perfecting Parliament: Reform, Liberalism and the Rise of Western Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Stephen J King, *The New Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

The year 2011 was marked by the onset of the Arab Spring and the emergence of a series of protest movements in the established liberal democracies of North America and Europe. The Arab Spring is about the resentment of decades of political and economic oppression and the search for new political representation. The Western protest movements are less about a desire to part ways with democracy than about dissatisfaction with the outputs of a poorly regulated free market. Fundamentally, both are about the struggle for a more equitable distribution of wealth. Against this context, each of the two books reviewed here carries a message about sustainable liberalization that has become highly relevant. Roger Congleton's central thesis focuses on the incremental and essentially linear evolution of Western liberal reforms, with parallel contributions from the political and economic realms. Stephen King, in turn, chronicles recent efforts to democratize and liberalize the economies of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), which have led to a concentration of wealth in the hands of ruling elites, the disempowerment of workers, and, subsequently, the rise and initial suppression of political Islam. Taken together, the two studies advance our understanding of the broader, conceptual context around the political transformations in the Arab world and allow for some tentative predictions.

Congleton's *Perfecting Parliament* develops a compelling approach to the mechanics of Western liberal constitutionalism. His central claim, framed as an interdisciplinary pivot between history and social science, is that liberal accomplishments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are the result of a series of gradual developments, the evolutionary product of "fine-grained constitutional bargaining," rather than of revolutionary change and institutional rupture (266). The project of liberalism, in other words, cannot lay claim to the creation of political or social surprises.

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Congleton reviews the constitutional and institutional histories of the United Kingdom, Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, Japan, and the United States. Pointing to the "king-and-council template" as the principal institutional mechanism around which reforms took place, he argues that the shift from monarchical rule to liberal constitutional democracy was realized through increased parliamentary authority and the election of parliamentarians by broad constituencies (266). Critical substantive reforms focused on land ownership, free trade, the abolition of slavery, public education, greater religious tolerance, and liberal constitutional reforms, including the expansion of suffrage. Congleton is careful to point out that each particular reform had to meet the interests of the office holders of the day, as only they were in a position to formally enact them.

Electoral reform movements were, in part, idealistic in nature and "partly pragmatic enterprises that favored shifts of policy-making authority to persons more likely to support particular reforms" (259). On other fronts, the breadth of the spectrum of liberal opinion, coupled with a largely non-doctrinaire approach and interest-based persuasion, meant that "conservative" policies very much remained in the picture among individual liberal reforms, each in itself a relatively minor development. This dynamic explains, among other outcomes, the survival of representative monarchies in several European countries. Had liberalism been a "truly revolutionary project with inflexible, radical goals," such incremental compromises could not have been realized (213). The overall "sustainability" of this co-operative, negotiated approach to reform is reflected in the fact that few liberal laws were repealed when conservative majorities were in power and that the supporting institutions remained robust over time.

Of particular contemporary relevance is Congleton's argument that political and economic reforms have joint explanatory value. During the nineteenth century, no countries industrialized without democratizing and no countries democratized without industrializing (601). While parliamentarians and their constituents may have seen greater direct benefit in economic liberalization than, for example, in the expansion of suffrage, the deeper causal relationships between economic and political forces remained complex and not immediately obvious. What is clear, argues Congleton, is that "[l]iberal reforms were not adopted simply to advance liberal ideals, but also in pursuit of profits and policy-making influence" (602). Substantive economic reforms were aimed at free trade, capitalization, and the rationalization of methods of production, but, crucially, they also included limitations on fraud and the abuse of market power. Such reforms could often only be advanced by forming coalitions of support substantially broader than the original group of advocates. Rational argument and persuasion were the central mechanisms. In essence, liberal reforms achieved a fragmentation and decentralization of both political and economic power.

King's *New Authoritarianism* carries a simple narrative with significant implications for the evolving path of the Arab Spring protests. King examines four regimes in the MENA region, Egypt, Algeria, Syria, and Tunisia, using four analytical components: policies, ruling coalitions,

institutions, and legitimacy. Following an initial period of "timid democratization" during the 1980s and 1990s, neo-liberal reforms led to the emergence of elites in these countries that favoured authoritarian approaches over the democratic empowerment of agricultural and industrial labourers. In contrast to reforms in Argentina, Spain, and Brazil, which succeeded because capitalists began to favour greater political openness through the influence of organized labour, regimes in the MENA region pursued a combination of single (ruling)-party democracy and patronage-based neo-liberal reforms (200).

Supported by overriding international interest in the stability of the oil-rich region rather than in national democratic accountability or workers' rights, authoritarian regimes were able to rely on highly discretionary privatization policies to retain the support of elites and to keep organized labour out of the political framework. As popular dissatisfaction grew, the interests of workers were taken up by Islamic parties, which ushered in the rise of political Islam. Under what King terms the "new authoritarianism," MENA regimes responded by invoking nationalism, a residual "patina of continued populism" (for example, 181), and, most importantly, the threat of Islamic fundamentalism as the legitimation for a new phase of authoritarianism. The Arab Spring has proven this strategy to be futile, and Islamic parties now show substantial political gains at the ballot box.

Intensely political in their impact, the Arab Spring movements are not sustained by a love of democracy or other political ideology. They are about economic opportunity and the right to a better life in one of the world's materially richest areas. At the same time, challenges to the sustainability of each transition remain formidable and are no longer limited to militant opposition. While Congleton reminds us of the institutional robustness that Western liberalism has achieved in its evolution, King cautions that the Arab world is still missing the institutional and social foundations upon which liberalization could evolve in a sustainable fashion. In short, progress in the MENA region can be expected to remain non-linear and marked by political experimentation for some time. The ruptures of the Arab Spring represent but one important step in this process.

The challenge for both Congleton and King is the role of ideology as an element of opposition to liberalization or democratization. Congleton emphasizes the historically pragmatic, non-ideological approach of liberals, which he sees as having been instrumental to the success of the reform movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, for his theory to retain not only historical, but also social scientific, value, it would need to be testable 'in reverse.' Would factions that remain ideologically opposed to liberal democracy—adherents of various forms of John Rawls' "unreasonable comprehensive doctrine"—be able to claw back liberal gains not only through militant, revolutionary action but also through the more incremental steps of political opposition? This idea, of course, mirrors the fears expressed by those who remain skeptical about the Arab Spring—that is, that some groups would use democratic processes to pursue anti-democratic goals, including a reversion to single-party, autocratic rule and

the elimination of a constitutionally protected pluralism. For King, the challenge is similar. Once the forces of liberalism have broken the cycle of secular-autocracy-to-prevent-Islamist-autocracy, do the new regimes need to continue to treat "radical Islam," now one political faction among several, as an enemy of the system, a decision that may lead to new justifications of violence and repression? What, in other words, is the scope of tolerance for ideologically motivated opponents of liberal democracy? Congleton and King leave this question unanswered.

From a pragmatic perspective, it is fairly clear that the devolution of economic centralization will form a critical component of any definition of progress in the Middle East and North Africa, including a successful marginalization of radical political positions. The emergence of elite cronyism is an outcome that, following Congleton, Western liberal democracies have historically avoided—if we bracket claims of the recent "Occupy" movements—through anti-monopoly legislation and the criminalization of corrupt activity. King, in turn, argues that the protest movements of the Arab Spring would need to evolve into a plurality of permanent secular and religious advocacy groups, jointly focused on fragmenting the power structures of residual elites. In this respect, both works offer useful contributions to the debate around the Arab Spring, as initial expectations of rapid progress, fed through social media and embraced in particular by young, unemployed men, now begin to stand in contrast to more cautious predictions that Arab liberalism, too, will remain an incremental, evolutionary process. And fears that the protest movements have indeed swept in a new wave of system opponents, who would capitalize on a lack of progress in the distribution of wealth to forestall the further evolution of pluralism, will need to be tempered by the more optimistic view that moderate forces, focused on the creation of stable and effective coalitions, economic opportunity, and strong constitutional frameworks, will attract and retain popular confidence.