Pathways to Stability for Transition Governments in the Middle East and North Africa

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Selectorate theory posits that within each society, there is a political selectorate containing a winning coalition. This coalition, comprised of societal individuals, groups, and entities, selects the national leader whose aim is political survival. The original version of the theory suggested that the selectorate expands in step with the ability of the leader to provide private or public goods to its supporters in various combinations. This study expands selectorate theory to the recent revolutions across Middle East and North Africa (MENA). With various regimes optimizing economic allocations, we believe that political survival in MENA societies is gained and maintained by concurrently fulfilling rising religious preferences. Stable MENA regimes also meet religious demands. Thus, leaders

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that ignore religious tides do so at their own peril. Addressing religious demands as the selectorate expands maximizes stability and reduces autocratic tendencies. We present selectorate and stakeholder assessments of six MENA societies during the Arab Spring. We find that selectorate expansion, regime stability, and regime survival depend as much on religiosity as on private–public payoffs optimization. Our results have striking implications for democratic preference promulgation and regime stability.

**Key words:** Middle East, Arab Spring, Selectorate Theory, stakeholder assessment, transition to democracy

**Overview**

The year 2011 was a seminal year in the history of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The region experienced a wave of revolutions and instability, popularly referred to as the Arab Spring. Countries in the region, then, can be classified into three broad categories: (i) those where uprisings resulted in the overthrow of standing regimes; (ii) those where uprisings failed to overthrow standing regimes; and (iii) states that did not experience popular uprisings. In the first category are Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia where uprisings resulted in the respective departures of Muammar Gaddafi, Hosni Mubarak, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali. In the second category, by contrast, uprisings in Syria and Bahrain have not thus far resulted into the toppling of their regimes. Finally, no uprisings were registered in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan, or Iran.

This instability observed in the Middle East in 2011 was not a general phenomenon. This article, an analysis of the region, tries to reconcile observed reality with existing theoretical propositions of selectorate theory that link the evolution of the selectorate with the provision of private goods and the emergence of democratic regimes. Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, and Morrow (2004) propose in the standard Selectorate Model that a leader’s political survival is based on the mix of private payoffs he can provide to members of his coalition, and the public goods provided to the general population. The standard version states that the proportion of private versus public goods determines the type of regime. As the selectorate enlarges, a monarchy will be followed by an authoritarian regime which in turn will be followed by a democratic regime. The key variable is a shift from the provision of private goods to the small winning coalition to the provision of public goods to the enlarged national coalition. However, the expansion of the selectorate in MENA shows that emerging leaders wishing to survive must take into account a mixture of preferences not driven by financial motives, and also by religious preferences.

A cursory historical assessment suggests that this insight has strong face validity. Once secular, autocratic despots are either gone or are on the way out, as evidenced by the removal of Hosni Mubarak, Zine Abidine Ben-Ali, Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the currently embattled Bashar al-Assad; they are replaced by government elites led or heavily influenced by Islamic parties. Thus, unlike the forecast of the standard Selectorate Model, these newly elected or appointed leaders must take into account the role of religion as much as the role of private and public goods in their survival calculus. The question driving this inquiry is why so many secular leaders were
challenged and frequently toppled; while more religious traditional leaders in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Jordan, or Bahrain were not challenged or survived. We propose that leaders of these monarchical-autocratic regimes retained support based on the legitimacy that is derived from implicit approval of their Islamist roots. If the data support this argument, then religion must be added to the standard Selectorate Model rationale to account for the selective political survival in MENA.

Using an agent-based approach (Abdollahian, Baranick, Efird, & Kugler, 2006), we explore and assess the discrepancy between political survival in the standard Selectorate Model and the reality of the Arab Spring. This allows us to directly track the causal dynamics of the shift in strength, motivation, and preference of coalitions, which emerge as the selectorate expands. During the course of the 2011 Arab Spring, we first mapped and then tracked the evolution of silent coalitions and stakeholders previously not mobilized or unmotivated across Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Libya, along with foreign, regional, and international interests. These assessments were done in real time throughout 2011 and 2012 (Bagherpour, 2012).

Our initial results find that public–private goods provision per selectorate theory alone do not reflect developments across our sample of Arab Spring countries. However, introducing a mixture of private–public goods and religious perceptions led us to develop a revised Selectorate Model that accounts for the early phase of the Arab Spring across most transitioning societies and their more current extensions. The predictions summarized below emerge from successive case studies tracking revolutions or lack thereof in MENA, which we documented in real time throughout 2011 and 2012. We organize the article as follows: First, we briefly review the standard Selectorate Model and suggest modifications required to account for MENA cases. We then provide the agent-based evidence showing that the addition of religion is essential to account for the Arab Spring variation in the evolution of political regimes. Finally, we summarize our results and findings, suggesting areas where this research can both be improved and made far more applicable for policy guidance.

The Selectorate Perspective

The works of Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson (1995), Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2004), Bueno de Mesquita, Siverson, and Smith (2008), and Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2010) on selectorate theory posit that within every populace of a given state, there is a subgroup of actors—the selectorate—who influence policy outcomes. Within this selectorate there is a winning coalition consisting of the subset of stakeholders who select the leadership and aid him or her to maintain power. Figure 1 shows the central argument of the Selectorate Model: that the size of the selectorate and the size of the winning coalition in proportion to the overall population determine the type of government a state will have.

At the top, a monarchy has a very small selectorate comprised of the nobility within which a winning coalition comprised of members of the ruling family support the king. At the bottom of the spectrum, a democracy has a very large selectorate made up of all citizens who can vote. In a democracy, leaders require a very large winning coalition consisting of the majority of those who cast their
vote. A major implication of the Selectorate Model is that as the size of the selectorate increases, the extent of authoritarianism decreases and democracy emerges (Bueno de Mesquita & Siverson, 1995). For this reason, democratic leaders seeking support of a winning majority coalition provide public goods to voters in order to survive politically. On the other hand, kings or dictators provide a disproportionate level of private goods to their small winning coalition to guarantee long-term political survival. Authoritarian regimes that inhabit the middle between Monarchy and Democracy need to mix private and public goods provision to survive and often cannot do so successfully when the selectorate expands.

Deposition takes place when the challenger gains an adequate number of supporters from the incumbent’s winning coalition. If the challenger gains more members of the coalition than the incumbent, the ruling leader is then removed as the challenger takes their place. In the case of the Arab Spring, our agent-based analysis of Libya below shows that the removal of Muammar Gaddafi was prompted when a former member of his winning coalition—Shokri Ghanem of the Libyan Oil Corporation—defected to the Libyan Transitional Council, thus strengthening the opposition.

The size of the winning coalition has as an impact on an incumbent’s prospects for political survival (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2004). Selectorate theory proposes that if the size of selectorate grows or the winning coalition shrinks, defecting becomes riskier (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2010). It is this risk of exclusion from the winning coalition that drives loyalty for the current leader or regime. Fear of reprisals provides a major advantage to whoever holds the status quo. For
this reason, authoritarian political systems with small winning coalitions embedded in a large selectorate, tend to be stable as the members of the winning coalition can easily be substituted from a large pool of replacement candidates from a sizable selectorate. Members within the winning coalition in authoritarian regimes are often driven by loyalty norms caused by the ease of substitution. Each member within the coalition attempts to surpass other, within-group competitors, to prove allegiance and to position for promotion.

This pattern is strongly exhibited by the current authoritarian regime in Syria. Al-Assad maintains control of Syria with the support of a small winning coalition within a large selectorate consisting of the Ba’ath Party. Al-Assad has empowered a system where many of the actors within his coalition support the status quo even more adamantly than al-Assad himself. In effect, al-Assad’s followers are extremely loyal because of their survival dependence. Consistent with the Selectorate Model, their allegiance is strong as members can easily be replaced by a vast array of candidates within the Ba’ath Party. The secular al-Assad Regime continues to persist in spite of an international campaign opposing his rule, coupled with an escalating civil war.

The classic Selectorate Model proposes that leaders are driven by one primary factor: the need to provide payoffs to the winning coalition in order to be selected and survive over time (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2010). The mix of private and public goods leaders choose for the purpose of maintaining power depends on the size of the selectorate. In a monarchy, the leader can survive by partitioning most of the state’s resources through private payoffs while devoting little to be delivered as public goods. The small selectorate and controllable winning coalition allow the leader to buy off support without the need to gain public approval. Therefore, so long as the leader satisfies his or her coalition, he or she maintains power. Because the vast majority of a dictator’s population are outside of the selectorate, he or she can limit public services while maintaining hefty private payoffs to his or her winning coalition. The leader can effectively disregard and disenfranchise the vast majority outside the inner circle because they have little or no say on the choice of ruling authority.

Revised Selectorate Model: The Role of Religion in Shaping Regimes

During the course of the Arab Spring, the strong role of religion obviously surfaced; this is not addressed by the Selectorate Model that focuses on secular private and public goods maximization. We believe that the following analysis shows that the role of religion in selectorate considerations needs to be further addressed to better understand MENA transitions. Evaluating the revolutions in Egypt and Libya with an agent-based approach shows the character, composition, and dynamics of various coalitions. Doing so, we accurately predicted that while these societies were becoming less secular, the selectorate was expanding, but they were not less authoritarian. In the case of Egypt, Islamic parties led by the Muslim Brotherhood (now the Freedom and Justice Party) and the ultraconservative Al Nour Party, gained over 75% of the Parliament through fair elections (Fleischman & Hassan, 2012). Both of these gained majority parliament seats in the newly formed Egyptian Parliament, in large part motivated by religion that is not accounted for in the Selectorate Model.
In the case of the Arab Spring, we believe that political survival is also driven by the direct acquiescence of the religious officials, with authoritarian interventions manifested by Islamic parties, an appointed Shura, or Sharia Law principles. These events must be placed in a new theoretical and policy context. The threat of Islamic extremism has been often exaggerated by secular autocrats across MENA to maintain their rule, thereby preventing democratization. A few examples are the Hussein-era Iraq, Gaddafi’s Libya, and Bashar al-Assad’s Syria. At the same time, secular forces have underestimated the real threat of Islamic radicalization within their ranks. Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979 created an autocratic system that was more draconian than the monarchy it overthrew in spite of an expanding selectorate. This begs the question, as the selectorate expands: Does a religious or a secular path lead to democracy? By historical observation and empirical testing of events unfolding during the Arab Spring, a record of the structure that emerges is summarized in Figure 2.

Across MENA, many countries’ religious preferences play a major part in determining the political survival of national leaders. Those that allow open elections, such as Egypt or Libya, may eventually follow the pattern of secular societies and maintain an open democratic system. The democratic transition process may occur in the realm of political Islam, but it is punctuated. In such cases, selectorates might expand, but participation is restricted by comprehensive inclusion of Islamic laws in the selection of candidates, and direct inclusion of religion into the affairs of the government (Ghadbian, 2003). Iran is the quintessential example of this regime type. Iran’s elections—while not perfect—do represent a large portion of the selectorate, but the primary change drivers are religious forces. Even though the selectorate is enlarged, Iran’s Islamic Revolution of 1979 illustrates the emergence of a movement that produced a theocratic–authoritarian government, becoming less democratic than the previous secular

Figure 2. The Revised Selectorate Model
government it overturned. In the months following the Shah’s departure, the people of Iran voted through national referendum by an overwhelming majority to become an Islamic Republic. By equally overwhelming popular support, Ayatollah Khomeini garnered dictatorial power as the religious and political leader of the country (Nasr, 2006).

The original Selectorate Model does not show key differences between religious and secular changes in power structure. For example, it does not distinguish between Iran’s theocratic government that expands the selectorate but restricts the winning coalition, and the evolution of Chile or Brazil from authoritarian military regimes to a true democracy where the expansion of the selectorate concurrently expands the winning coalition. Like the general Western experience, the size of the selectorate in Iran grew rapidly when newly enacted voting rights were extended to the majority of Iranian citizens following the fall of the Shah. The country also developed a relatively large winning coalition represented by a freely elected president and parliamentarians. Yet Iran became a theocratic–authoritarian state and remains so today, as the multiparty system that has become subservient to a religious Supreme Leader that has dictatorial power, invoking divine rule from God.

The status quo is consistent with either selectorate perspective as monarchical–authoritarian regimes still dominate many states in the region. These are purely Islamist authoritarian states that have small selectorates and consequently smaller winning coalitions, which reject large selectorate or democratic elections (Lewis, 1995). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia clearly meets the selectorate definition of a monarchy. Saudi Arabia maintains a small selectorate and an even smaller winning coalition. The financial resources of the Saudis are distributed disproportionately as private payoffs to the king’s inner circle compared with a much smaller remainder allocated to the public welfare (Beblawi, 1990). Nevertheless, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, through its oil resources, can afford to provide private payoffs in conjunction with public services on a scale that most countries cannot. For example, in response to the Arab Spring, the Saudi Royal family provided an additional allowance of $15,000 to every Saudi citizen, that is, is, a private payment aimed to quell potential discontent. In this context, once again, the religious dimension is central because Saudi King Abdullah must address the preferences of his Islamic constituency with issues that have more to do with religious needs than economic concerns.

In summary, the MENA crisis demonstrates the need to revise the original Selectorate Model. In the revised model, we factor the role of religious ideology in conjunction with the expansion of the selectorate driven by public–private goods mix. The MENA experience suggests that the religious leaders survive in environments that experience an expanded selectorate by calling upon religious (ideological) principles rather than fiscal reallocations to secure their positions. Whether this is a short-term delay in the process or a more permanent evolution, we can only begin to question.

**Toward an Integrated Test of the Revised Selectorate**

To track the evolution of events taking place during the Arab Spring, we used an agent-based approach to make a series of predictions on MENA countries over
the course of 2011 (Abdollahian et al., 2006; Bagherpour, 2012). The objective is to systematically show how the expansion of the selectorate affects the distribution of public and private goods and the evolution of secular democratic principles.

Using multiple case studies across 2011 and 2012, we analyze regime transitions and political survival across Egypt, Bahrain, Syria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. We applied the agent-based model to capture elements of the selectorate and the winning coalition, along with other domestic and international stakeholders playing a role in the outcome of events. By mapping and tracking the selectorate in an agent-based format, we harness the power of computer simulations in predicting what decision makers would expect based on their present positions on governance. The agent-based model generates a picture of the current and projected political landscape.

Previous publications have documented the validity of this approach (Bueno de Mesquita, 1997; Feder, 1995; Kugler & Feng, 1997; Tammen et al., 2000). To capture the evolution of the selectorate we traced the preferences for governance regime using an issue continuum. The preferences of domestic, regional, and international stakeholders in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are arranged along a spectrum ranging from 0 (Harsh Autocracy) to 100 (Liberal Democracy).

Variations that reflect the judgments of subject matter experts are incorporated. We defined the unique status quo in Iran at “25” as a Supreme Leader Structure that grants religious and governance authority to the Ayatollah Khamenei. In the case of the Bahrain’s monarchy, the scale measured the extent of support for the Al Khalifa regime and opposition indicates support for democracy (liberal). We believe that these variations do not affect this analysis that centers on the relation between the expansion of the selectorate and the change in the authoritarian/democratic principles of governance.

Once the stakeholders and their group membership is obtained, individual stakeholders are positioned on the scale, and their level of influence and level of importance attached to the issue were collected. The stakeholder positions on the issue were verified by incorporating media statements from the various stakeholders or leaders. In conducting these interviews, we measured the relative power of the various groups, the power of the actors, their positions on the issue, and the importance they placed on such issues within the continuum.

Hypotheses

A number of specific propositions that emerge from MENA but are linked to more general propositions emerging from the Selectorate Model will be tested. The first of these relates to the stability of winning coalitions as posed by Black (1958):

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H1: \text{The further away the winning coalition is from the median stakeholder, the greater the conditions for a political crisis or uprising.}
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Median stakeholders were weighted based on each particular stakeholder’s level of influence. For example, in the case of Syria, Bashar al-Assad has the greatest
influence. We captured the domestic median preferences on the issue of governance and compared it with the current or deposed leader’s position. We also compared the domestic median with the global median. The global median accounts for all the stakeholders, domestically and internationally, while the domestic median only captures the actors within the country being analyzed to more accurately capture selectorate theory’s domestic focus.

A second general proposition emerges from the addition of religion to the standard stakeholder model; this has indirect implications for the character of the newly emerging regime:

H2: Political survival of leaders in MENA is determined by religious preferences in conjunction with the public–private goods argument posited by the Selectorate Model.

If supported, this argument is related to the survival of religious leaders and the distinct semi-authoritarian evolution of MENA regimes that are heavily influenced by religion. Prior to analyzing the results, we observed that almost all the remaining governments in MENA have a religious party within their polity. The most stable governments have either developed a coalition with the religious stakeholders or are a nonsecular government in entirety. The governments which have been toppled during the Arab Spring were secular and are being replaced with less secular leaders. Based on these observations, we posit that political survival is linked to religious preferences, a dimension that is not accounted for in the standard Selectorate Model.

The Case of Egypt

The analysis of Egypt in Figures 3 and 4 indicates that the median in Egypt was positioned between a multiparty and single-party system. As the selectorate expanded and free elections were expected, the median selectorate rejected Mubarak’s authoritarian government in place prior to the uprising. As the gap between the median stakeholder and Hosni Mubarak grew, the model effectively anticipated Mubarak’s departure. The move toward an inclusive selectorate that favored democracy was evident from the emergence of multiple parties. Parliamentary elections in 2011 concluded with the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party gaining the majority of seats in the Parliament, and a minority Islamist bloc gaining one-third of the seats, as anticipated by the median position. Subsequently, Muhammad Morsi’s election as president of Egypt resulted from support by the Muslim Brotherhood (Fadel, 2012). Although it is difficult to predict if democracy will emerge in the long term, the forecast based on the median stakeholder provided early evidence that Egypt was engaging in a democratic transition, as evident from a growing selectorate and a relatively fair election process.

Our suggested revised Selectorate Model requires that religion should be accounted for. This perspective holds that as the level of participation increased, the role of religion in politics also increased, but the level of liberal democracy may not have followed. Indeed, the Morsi government relied far more significantly on religion than the preceding nondemocratic government of Mr. Mubarak. The data reported in the two figures suggest little indication that Egypt would remain secular as it did under Mubarak. In April of 2012, the trend toward
Figure 3. Median Position in Egypt on February 7, 2011
an increasingly religious polity emerged when the Muslim Brotherhood broke its pledge not to field any presidential candidates in response to the ultraconservative Nour Party, and announcing that they would support a prominent party Islamist Hazem Saleh Abu Ismail (Kirkpatrick, 2012). The recognition of Islamic principles that may result in the imposing of Sharia Law becomes a significant concern for Democratic transition, because such laws can restrict those who may have secular preferences. Figures 3 and 4 confirm that the median stakeholder position moved closer to a multiparty democracy, concurrent with the rise of influence by Islamic parties. Indeed, the ultraconservative Nour Party and the Muslim Brotherhood moved toward the domestic median, and we projected that the domestic median would be the same as the Muslim Brotherhood’s position. Although the global median indicated volatility, the merging of the domestic median with the Muslim brotherhood was early indication that the domestic preferences on religion and governance stabilize and become unified.

Although the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood were ousted in 2013 following massive nationwide protests, the subsequent reassertion of power by the military has been accompanied by the inclusion of several secular and religious parties that were never included under the Mubarak era autocracy. Furthermore, the Muslim Brotherhood was not ousted because of their religious beliefs, but rather their inability to provide public services to the general population. Therefore, in spite of banning the Muslim Brotherhood from politics, greater inclusions of religious preferences continue to be incorporated in parties such as the Salafist-leaning Al Nour and Al Watan parties. Ultimately, the selectorate has still expanded significantly compared with the Mubarak era regime in spite of the military’s reassertion of power.

The volatility of the global median between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Military—the two strongest factions in Egypt—shows that the secular authoritarian groups are in place while the religious factions now favor limited democracy. As the new government evolves, it may well be that the religious factions will choose a more authoritarian stance to confront the secular opposition. The critical point is that the expansion of the selectorate did not lead to liberal democratic principles—rather, secular factions remain authoritarian while the religious factions favor a more open democratic structure.

The Case of Libya

The median stakeholder simulations reported in Figures 5 and 6 show that Libya is engaging in a transition phase where the size of the selectorate is expanding, making it less authoritarian in the interregnum while concurrently becoming less secular. Figure 6 depicts the median stakeholder in March of 2011, merging with Mustafa Abdel Jalil, the head of the Libyan Transitional Council. In September of 2011, right before the death of Gaddafi, the domestic median’s move toward liberal democracy is apparent (driven by Omar El Hariri, another prominent leader within the Libyan Transitional Council). The move toward an Islamist polity became apparent when the Libyan Transitional Council announced in October of 2011 that Sharia Law will become the main source of legislation in Libya (Gamel, 2011).
Figure 5: Median Stakeholder Projection in Libya on March 24, 2011
Figure 6. Median Stakeholder Projection in Libya on September 6, 2011
The expansion of the selectorate takes place in Libya. Following any popular revolt, the size of the selectorate increases because many disenfranchised seek to be included into the decision-making process to gain access to benefits once kept from them (Goldstone, 1995). In the case of Libya, the emergence of dozens of political parties and inflated promises to the general population reflect the shift from private to public good allocations. In September of 2011, we forecasted that Libya will transition to a hybrid between a tribal system and multiparty democracy. The national government was expected to have a selection process based on predetermined representation by tribal affiliation. In accordance with the original Selectorate Model, the country will be less authoritarian because of the emergence of a larger selectorate represented by the various tribes and emerging political parties. However, our analysis of Libya throughout 2011 indicates a trend where the selectorate size will stabilize. The selectorate will be larger than under the previous Gaddafi regime, but will not meet a stable threshold for a lasting democracy.

The interaction between an expanding selectorate, religion, and democratization is clearly apparent with the implementation of Sharia Law. Beyond the public–private goods argument described in the standard Selectorate Model, analysis attempting to account for regime change in Libya needs to account for the role of religion in order to accurately describe the calculus for political survival. Two of the leading parties in Libya, the National Gathering for Freedom, Justice and Development and Party of Reform and Development, have publicly stated their support for Sharia Law. While stating their religious platform, these parties also continue to push for free-market nationalist agendas (Habboush, 2012).

One of the other leading political parties is Al Haq. Although there is a strong Islamic strain running through its agenda, Al Haq has promised to deliver public goods and services by reallocating oil revenue. Consistent with the Selectorate Model, Al Haq promised to the Libyan people free electricity, free education, free health care, cheaper food prices, free land to build on, a free car every 11 years, free phone and Internet, a free house, and social security payments for the unemployed. Although these may be inflated promises, the point is clear: There is an emergence of a movement that is driven by a desire for public services intertwined with Islamic principles.

In Libya, a secular authoritarian regime was summarily replaced, the selectorate expanded, concurrent with the rise of religious fervor. Democratic principles seem to be in vogue, but a turn toward liberal democracy is still in the future.

The Case of Syria

The evolution of events in Syria for 2011 covering the short to medium time horizon indicates that Bashar al-Assad has managed to survive because of his ability to maintain his domestic coalition, in addition to regional and international support by players such as Russia and Iran. Al-Assad’s relative influence began to wane as former supporters, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, turned against him in support of the opposition. But he was able to maintain his autocratic rule throughout the course of 2011 because the distribution of power was in favor of
the alliances he had built domestically and internationally. In such a case, al-Assad has crafted a system in Syria where his winning coalition members rely on him as an indispensable element for their own survival. The regime has been able to withstand remarkable pressure from the international community, along with a defecting military due to the structure of the selectorate in Syria. The regime has a single party structure made up of the Ba’ath Party. Al-Assad has a large pool of candidates from within his Ba’ath Party. This large selectorate allows him to pull substitutes as potential replacement for members of his inner circle if necessary. Al-Assad’s ability to easily substitute members of his winning coalition drives a norm of loyalty (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2010). Such a dynamic creates a system where members compete to show their loyalty in fear of being ousted from the inner circle. For this reason, al-Assad’s government withstood a tremendous amount of pressure where other regimes faced with similar circumstances may have folded much sooner.

Al-Assad’s ability to resist and maintain power is apparent by the continued killing of thousands of Syrian citizens. But coalitions continue to shift against him. Following months of a brutal onslaught by the al-Assad regime, the international community expressed the situation in Syria as a human rights crisis. Many, who were once al-Assad’s allies, have turned against him. Turkey, for example, has recognized the Syrian opposition as a legitimate alternative to al-Assad and has gone as far as providing sanctuary to the opposition leaders now situated in Ankara. Although much of the international community has turned against him in support of aiding the Syrian opposition, Bashar al-Assad still has support from Iran and Russia.

The international coalition opposing al-Assad is stronger than his alliance; however, Russia continues to act as a guardian of the regime at the United Nations, while Iran’s presence as a regional power makes Turkey and Saudi Arabia reluctant to act more aggressively vis-à-vis military action. Although not as powerful, Iran and Russia, in particular, have positioned themselves in such a manner so as to prevent action against Syria. In short, they are acting as veto players. In November of 2011, our forecast update for Syria anticipated the escalation of conflict from a brutal suppression to a civil war. In spite of the degradation of al-Assad’s power, he still remains resilient and is not expected to depart Syria unless there is a foreign intervention.

Al-Assad’s Syria has many similarities to Hussein-era Iraq. As an Alawite, al-Assad is a minority ruling a country that has Sunni majority, much in the same fashion that Saddam Hussein ruled a Shiite-majority Iraq as a member of the Sunni minority. Syria is a country that is highly authoritarian and does not include religion in major organs of government. The public–private payoffs argument holds true under the al-Assad regime as the primary motive for his survival, a typical example of an autocrat who provides few benefits to the disenfranchised while providing major concessions to his winning coalition. However, without the role of religious leaders within his winning coalition, Syria has become highly unstable. Similar to many autocrats in MENA, he has used the threat of Islamic extremism as an argument for his secular rule. Bashar al-Assad’s marginalization of the Muslim Brotherhood and the violent suppression by his father Hafez reveal the significance they place on such a threat.
Although there are secular elements within the Syrian National Transitional Council, a major force driving the opposition are Islamists (Ignatius, 2012). Similar to the events in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood promised Islamic Sharia as a major source for future legislation if elected to power, with the prospect of a post-al-Assad Syria (Ignatius, 2012). A revised Selectorate Model that accounts for the role of religion should be considered. If Syria begins a democratic transition, the role of religion is expected to play into the calculus of political leaders just as much, if not more than the role of private–public goods. This is evident by the projected role of Islamic stakeholders in the opposition movement such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and more extreme elements.

Figures 7 and 8 depict the projected median stakeholders. In the first projection from May of 2011, the median stakeholder position is the same as Bashar al-Assad’s position. In November of 2011, the distance between the median stakeholder and al-Assad remained minuscule. The al-Assad regime becomes more isolated internationally, but the distance from the median only grows significantly when accounting for international stakeholders. The median surpasses the threshold past a single party semi-democratic preference, while al-Assad holds on to power if international pressure continues to mount. If this gap continues, al-Assad’s rule will become less tenable. Al-Assad was able to maintain rule through private payoffs to his coalition, with very little benefits going to his disenfranchised citizenry. Yet the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood and their calls for Sharia Law in a post-al-Assad Syria are yet examples of why the role of religion should be incorporated into a revised Selectorate Model for application to MENA.

**The Case of Saudi Arabia**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the most authoritarian regimes in MENA. Analysis indicates that Saudi Arabia’s government structure is stable and not prone to change in the short to medium time horizon. The status quo governance structure in Saudi Arabia will remain unchanged with little or no reform. The United States, along with the international community, represented by the global median in Figure 9, will not change their position even with a dramatic waning of influence by the Saudi Royal family.

The projected domestic median in Figure 9 depicts a system where the selectorate and the winning coalition are firmly in support of a single ruler under the House of Saud. There is no credible challenge to the Saudi rule. A weak set of stakeholders, including the youth, females, and Shiite minorities are the primary groups supporting democratic reforms. These stakeholders are and will likely remain disenfranchised and irrelevant within the Saudi political system; they are unable to challenge the stability of the ruling authority. Lack of change in positions suggests support for a stable undemocratic Saudi Arabia not prone to reform.

In the short term, a challenge to the leadership in Saudi Arabia will not pose a threat to the governance structure of the country. Any challenge will most likely derive from an internal power struggle within the Saudi royal family, changing the personality of leaders after the passing of King Abdullah. This reshuffling is not expected to produce a major change in governance. Governing elites use their massive oil wealth to provide private payoffs to the ruling family members, and
Figure 8. Median Stakeholder Position in Syria on November 7, 2011
Figure 9. Median Stakeholder Position in Saudi Arabia—October 2011
tribal leaders receive disproportionate allowances. They also provide large government subsidies to Saudi citizens in the form of free education, land, allowances, and other material goods. In spite of such private payoffs and generous public goods provision, the analysis shows that a major part of the selectorate in Saudi Arabia is not driven by financial considerations but by religion. Without support from the highly conservative Islamic Shura Council, the Saudi Royal family could lose its legitimacy that is based on their proclaimed role as protectors of the religious shrine in Mecca. The Saudi Royal family relies heavily on Shura Council support in order to survive.

Several policies adopted by the government reflect this reality. The Shura Council dictates a strict Wahabist interpretation of Islamic Law. Sharia law is paramount to any economic initiative. King Abdullah’s political survival is based on support from the Islamic clergy, a dimension that has little to do with public–private benefits and much to do with religious ideology. In Figure 9, the distance between the median and the winning coalition led by the Shura Council is miniscule. In short, Saudi Arabia is stable in the short to medium time horizon. So long as they continue to receive revenue from their oil profits and gain the support from the Muslim Ulama, the authoritarian regime in Saudi Arabia will not be challenged.

The Case of Iran

There is more tension now within the Iranian regime than any time following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1988. This does not mean the Islamic Republic of Iran is going to collapse, or that in the short term the country’s religious leaders will follow the fate of Mubarak and Ben Ali. The tension in Iran stems from a conflict between the government and the disenfranchised citizenry, as well as a conflict within the government.

The conflict between the government and the disenfranchised reflects challenges by various opposition groups—including student and minority factions—that oppose the governance regime and generally advocate a more liberal democratic regime. The government accurately views these stakeholders primarily as nuisances rather than existential threats. The tension within the government is primarily driven by a conflict over the power to allocate resources, rather than a debate on how to improve the lives of the citizenry. Much of the fight over power and distribution of wealth within the state apparatus is driven by the question of succession. This issue is important because of the age of Supreme Leader Khamenei. It is reported that the Supreme Leader is ill and his passing is in the near horizon. This certainly plays a role in the calculations of the senior stakeholders in Iran’s government. Thus, power brokers are competing in order to secure their future status upon the death of Ayatollah Khamenei.

Why did Iran remain stable in 2011 while many of its regional neighbors, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Bahrain, experienced violent instability? A major reason is that the serious debate within Iran has been primarily over distribution of resources within the power apparatus. Regime change was not on the agenda. Indeed, Ayatollah Khamenei built a coalition that has gained political support at the expense of President Ahmadinejad. So long as Ayatollah Khamenei continues to maintain this preponderant religious coalition while coercing the
opposition, his grip on power will remain firm. In 2011, we saw no development of new coalitions powerful enough to oppose Khamenei or make substantive calls for reform. Indeed, in October of 2011, Khamenei stated that eliminating the office of the President in Iran was an option, sending a clear signal of inward consolidation of power in the hands of the religious coalition (Akbari & Abdlo, 2011). His success is supported by the fact that there are a few signs of splintering within the military, or collapsing support within the hard-line conservatives leading the Parliament. Given this stable environment, Iran is unlikely to experience domestic pressures to reform toward democracy.

Figures 10 and 11 show that the domestic median and the Supreme Leader hold the same position. The domestic opposition groups are marginalized and the same applies to the exiled groups. Iran’s relatively large selectorate is dominated by a winning coalition that supports a religious, authoritarian state. Iran is a stable authoritarian regime because the winning coalition is small and coherent, and can gain the support of the large selectorate. Members within Khamenei’s winning circle are substitutable because of the large pool of candidates waiting to enter the winning coalition. This drives a norm for loyalty as the actors within the large selectorate jockey for access to the leader though acts displaying their commitment (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2010).

The public–private payoffs argument of the original Selectorate Model once again is not sufficient to describe Khamenei’s calculus for political survival. Therefore, as in previous MENA cases, the role of religion is central to political survival. The Supreme Leader’s power is derived from religious legitimacy that grants him divine authority. Under such authority, Ayatollah Khamenei can practice dictatorial power. His logic for political survival is based on religious legitimacy under an Islamic law and the private benefits he provides to his inner circle. Iran is less authoritarian than Saudi Arabia because it allows a large selectorate, but the role religion plays is similarly influential in the long-term politics.

International actors can place a tremendous amount of pressure on Iran’s status quo structure. The distance between Khamenei and the global median position indicates the growing foreign dissatisfaction between the status quo and those seeking to change it. While the system is stable domestically, the international pressure—regarding Iran’s controversial nuclear program, among others—is a source of instability.

The Case of Bahrain

Bahrain is a small island country situated in the Persian Gulf between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Islamic Republic of Iran. Throughout history, it has served as a strategically significant island providing port access and a transit point for travel and trade. Although the country is a relatively wealthy country due to the discovery of oil in the 20th century, the Kingdom of Bahrain remains strategic because it provides access to Persian Gulf shipping lanes. The U.S. 5th Fleet uses Bahrain as its major port and staging area for naval operations in the Persian Gulf.

The 2011 uprising against the long-entrenched Al Khalifa arose unexpectedly. Realizing the rising Iranian influence of a Shiite-led majority in Bahrain, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other Arabs of the Gulf Cooperation Council
Figure 10. Median Stakeholder Position in Iran on March 23, 2011
Figure 11. Median Stakeholder Position in Iran in December 2011
(GCC) provided support to the Sunni minority. The Al Khalifa Royal Family succeeded in quelling the uprising. This is not an unusual occurrence in the history of Bahrain. The Royal Family has ruled the Kingdom of Bahrain for over 200 years because of its willingness to side and make concessions with whichever power could guarantee its political survival. The Al Khalifa Family has switched alliances repeatedly, ranging from declaration of loyalty to British rule in 1861, all the way to the 2011 supplication to Saudi Arabia.

Our projected median assessed in November of 2011 (Figure 12) indicates that Bahrain’s rule under the Al Khalifa Family is stable. Relying on support from Saudi Arabia and the United States as their security guarantors, the Al Khalifa Family is expected to hold on to power in Bahrain. Shiite-led elements, such as Al Haq and Al Wifaq, will remain marginalized in spite of their initial support from Iran. Fundamentally, the GCC members, including Qatar, Kuwait, UAE, and Saudi Arabia, will maintain strong support for Bahrain’s ruling family, seemingly to counter Iranian-led Shiite influence.

Stakeholder analysis shows that the opposition element most likely to continue adamantly working against the Al Khalifa Family will be Shiite-led Al Haq. Analysis anticipated that the Waad Opposition Party, the Al Wifaq party, and Iran would reduce their anti-ruling family activities. This suggests that Al Khalifa continues to make concessions that strengthen its selectorate and reduce tensions. There were already signs of such concessions prior to the analysis. In August of 2011, for example, Bahrain’s government provided the largest salary increase in the country’s history for state employees and retirees (al-Jayousi, 2011). The Khalifa also created a monthly allowance budget that had not existed before (al-Jayousi, 2011).

This series of concessions made by the Al Khalifa family match the behavior predicted by the Selectorate Model based on shifts in private payoffs and public goods. However, once again the standard Selectorate Model does not account for religion. Part of the Al Khalifa’s legitimacy is based on the family’s religious role. The King appoints a Shura Council of 40 religious scholars to advise him on governance. Bahrain is not as authoritarian as Saudi Arabia, but its mix of Sunni and Sunni Wahabbism within its polity, with lesser representation of Shia demands, make it a nonsecular government.

Were Bahrain to expand the selectorate and become more democratic, analysis indicates that governance will become even less secular because of the addition of a majority Shiite coalition with strong religious commitments. A preview of this process is indicated by parliamentary elections in 2006 that displayed the rise of Shia and Sunni Islamists within the elected polity. The standard Selectorate Model suggests that if Bahrain were to expand the selectorate, the primary calculus for political survival would lead to an expansion of public services and a rise of Democracy. However, the Islamist-dominated polity likely to emerge would be guided by religious preferences as much or more than by economic benefits. The revised Selectorate Model suggests that the emerging regime would be theocratic–authoritarian rather than democratic.

In summary, the role of religion remains an indispensable tool of the Al Khalifa family’s political survival. The formula for stability in Bahrain is similar to that of Saudi Arabia and Iran: a mix of private payoffs and public services guided by religious preferences.
Figure 12. Median Stakeholder Position in Bahrain on November 9, 2011
Potential Implications

Our empirical case studies suggest that across MENA societies, policymakers and academics alike should consider revising the Selectorate Model, as leaders seeking to survive politically face electorate challenges and rely not only on reallocations of the private and public goods but also on religious symbolism. The role of religion helps to account for stability and distorts regime change seemingly in direct proportion to the relative religiosity of each country. The insight is that recent MENA regime change is based on religious demands rather than economic incentives, and for that reason regime changes generate policy shifts that differ from those in the West. Transitions motivated by selectorate expansion taking place in MENA will not lead to liberal democracy—at least in the short term—because religion is an independent, important dimension that perpetuates authoritarian tendencies. One cannot assume that the expansion of the selectorate leads to liberal democracy and the demise of authoritarian regimes. Indeed, authoritarian regimes successfully averted challenges in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Iran because of the close connection to religion. The selectorate transitions in secular Egypt and Libya suggest that these countries, after becoming less authoritarian, are also becoming more religious and less liberal.

Our revised Selectorate Model, incorporating the findings of this study, shows that the implications are generally supported. The horizontal axis of this curve depicts the spectrum of governance beginning with the left side as dictatorial government, all the way to the right as a liberal democracy with multiple political parties. The vertical axis depicts the religious spectrum starting at the bottom with no role of religion in governance, all the way to the top with Islamic law or Islamist governance structure. The extent of religiosity or secularism in the government is expressed by the preference of the stakeholder located at the domestic median based on qualitative knowledge of the individual or group’s religious views and positions. These results can be further summarized in the revised Selectorate Model based on Figure 2.

Table 1 and Figure 13 show the six studies that address the Arab Spring across the 2011–2012 time frame where we forecasted the direction of the domestic median indicating what type of government will be present in the future. The remaining cases are based on our reading and assessment of the situation in each country. The extent of religiosity or secularism in the government is expressed by the location of a leading stakeholder in the policy, coupled with qualitative knowledge on the individual or group’s religious views and positions.

As an initial test, the standard stakeholder model correctly addresses 6 of 13 cases considered. Libya under Gaddafi and Syria under Bashar, and Egypt under Mubarak fit the Authoritarian standard structure—but the follow-up on Libya after transition is unclear. Lebanon, Malaysia, and the Maldives fit well with the standard model. Almost 50% of all cases are effectively accounted for. Of the seven misassigned, two or 20% showed that religion, rather than financial considerations, is the key driver. In Iran, religious fervor is paramount and financial considerations secondary. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi inspired by religion is seemingly more important than the provision of public goods. In the remaining cases, both financial and religious incentives generate change. Turkey is drifting toward a more religious stance, but with an eye to fiscal
Table 1. Interaction Between Religion and Democracy in MENA—2011–2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Public–Private payoffs</td>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Upper bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt in transition</td>
<td>Public–Private payoffs</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Lower bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya in transition</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Public–Private payoffs</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Upper bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Public–Private payoffs</td>
<td>Secularism</td>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Lower bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Public–Private payoffs</td>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Upper bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Public–Private payoffs</td>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Upper bound</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
success. Lebanon, Malaysia, and the Maldives recognize religion, but do not emphasize it as a primary transformational factor.

While we explicitly recognize the small sample, multiple case study approach restricts general inferences. Our initial implications based on these results are promising. The standard stakeholder model accounts for over 50% of cases. The remaining cases raise serious concerns about the motivation for change. Saudi Arabia does not fit the pattern described, but still retains a small selectorate. Iran’s transition to an expanded selectorate following the Shah was driven by religious fervor, and despite that expansion, retained its authoritarian characteristic. It is too early to assess Morsi’s Egypt, but the early promise of liberal democracy as the selectorate expanded has now vanished. Turkey has shifted from a well-established secular semi-authoritarian regime to a less secular, more religious regime that maintains the support of a large selectorate, but seems to be increasingly authoritarian. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have thwarted the expansion of the selectorate and retain authoritarian regimes linked to religion.

The threshold for where the standard selectorate theory is a sufficient explanation for governance and transition is in our view based on prioritization of preferences (Zagare, 1990). Governments that hold secular rules as the first priority and consider Islamic principles as secondary evolve, congruent with the model’s expectations. By contrast, countries where governance follows religious rules or principles as the first priority, and where secular fiscal considerations are a secondary concern, evolve outside of classic expectations. Our revised Selectorate Model that allows religion to play a transformative role during selectorate expansion fits MENA reality more accurately. When Islamic political parties represent the polity, fiscal considerations are not the driving force to expand the selectorate, nor do they dictate the rules for political survival. Religious conformity trumps secular economic maximization. The priority for the
leaders seeking to survive these cases is religious conformity. As one moves toward the center of the curve, a mix of private benefits and public goods dictates effective governance. The irony is that religious suppression in the name of secularism in the case of Libya, Turkey, Egypt, or Syria kept religious groups marginalized, radicalizing disenfranchised Muslims and frequently forcing them to act outside the law. As the selectorate expands, religious groups revolt to gain access to religious traditions rather than public goods, which paradoxically constrain the secular freedoms of the new enlarged selectorate.

Perhaps because there has not been a wide-scale secular reform movement with Islam, no democratically elected state with a majority Muslim population succeeded without the presence of Islamic parties. Turkey, Malaysia, Lebanon, and Maldives attest to this historical trend. The more detailed studies covering the Arab Spring and Iran reinforce a simple idea: Political survival is determined by a leader’s ability to maintain a winning coalition. In MENA, this requires religious incorporation.

The standard selectorate theory would have us believe that power is maintained or gained merely through the mix of private payoffs to a leader’s coalition with a portion of public goods given to the rest of the expanding selectorate in relation to size. However, the emergence of Islamist regimes proves differently. Our forecasts reveal that formerly secular states, such as Egypt, Libya, and eventually Syria, expand the selectorate size. However, they become no less autocratic, while at the same time becoming more religious with the rise of majority Islamist parties. Indeed, open elections in Egypt gave rise to the Muslim Brotherhood that combined with more extreme Islamist parties gaining over 75% of the seat in the Parliament and the Presidency. In similar fashion, Libya has given rise to numerous Islamist parties that did not exist during Gaddafi’s reign, persuading the Libyan Transitional Council to impose Sharia Law within a once secular regime. Finally, MENA countries that had uprisings are all being led or challenged by Islamist oppositions, ranging from armed extremists in Syria, the Islah Party in Yemen, to the Al Wifaq Party in Bahrain. Those who have avoided uprisings (Iran and Saudi Arabia) or successfully quelled them (Bahrain) did so by the implicit cooperation that appeased their Islamic stakeholders. Indeed, religious preferences must be taken into account as the selectorate expands in the calculus for political survival in MENA.

Political survival in MENA societies is gained and maintained not just by the provision of economic benefits but also by fulfilling rising religious preferences. The countries that are least prone to collapse are those who have religious elements within their winning coalitions. Leaders that ignore the religious tides do so at their own peril. The irony is that addressing the religious preferences of these newly emerging political societies prior to the expansion of the selectorate will likely minimize the autocratic tendencies that will take place during the transition period.

Based on our case studies of the Arab Spring is our assessment of the interaction between the survival of the leaders, the expansion of the selectorate, the structure of coalitions, and the stability of the regimes considering religiosity and private-public payoffs.

In examining the Arab Spring, political survival goes beyond just the provision of public services and private payoffs. The summary chart depicted in Table 2
## Table 2. Summary Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Egypt</th>
<th>Libya</th>
<th>Syria</th>
<th>Iran</th>
<th>Saudi Arabia</th>
<th>Bahrain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Uprising</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Survival of leader</strong></td>
<td>Mubarak removed</td>
<td>Gaddafi removed</td>
<td>al-Assad remains</td>
<td>Khamenei remains</td>
<td>Saudi Family remains</td>
<td>Al Khalifa Family remains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stability</strong></td>
<td>Unstable</td>
<td>Unstable</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>Stable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stakeholder closest to domestic median</strong></td>
<td>Muslim Brotherhood</td>
<td>Omar El Hariri of Transitional Council (Islamic preference)</td>
<td>Bashar al-Assad (Secular)</td>
<td>Khamenei (Islamic preference)</td>
<td>King Abdullah (Islamic preference)</td>
<td>Al Khalifa Family (Islamic preference)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Government type</strong></td>
<td>Transitional Multiparty Democracy</td>
<td>Transitioning Multiparty Tribal system</td>
<td>Autocratic</td>
<td>Theocratic</td>
<td>Religious Monarchy</td>
<td>Religious Monarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Private payoffs versus public goods (measured by CPI prior to Arab Spring)</strong></td>
<td>2.9—highly corrupt</td>
<td>2—highly corrupt</td>
<td>2.6—highly corrupt</td>
<td>2.7—highly corrupt</td>
<td>4.4—corrupt</td>
<td>5.1—corrupt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religiosity</strong></td>
<td>Islamic Parties included (less secular)</td>
<td>Sharia Law imposed with Islamic Parties (less secular)</td>
<td>Secular</td>
<td>Islamist Government</td>
<td>Islamist Government</td>
<td>Islamist Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selectorate size</strong></td>
<td>Expanding selectorate with competitive elections</td>
<td>Expanding selectorate with competitive elections</td>
<td>No change—small selectorate with noncompetitive elections</td>
<td>Large selectorate with noncompetitive elections</td>
<td>No change—small selectorate with noncompetitive elections</td>
<td>No change—small selectorate with noncompetitive elections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
shows that stability is a function of public–private goods, participation, and religion. Given the sparse data on public expenditures versus private payoffs, evidence of a disproportionate level of private payoffs is reflected by the Corruption Perception Index (CPI). All of the governments in the case studies illustrated above are either corrupt or highly corrupt, an indication of disproportionate private payoffs. Corruption and conflict are not directly related. In the case of participation, there is no numeric data comparing participation in terms of voting across all countries. Instead, we made a qualitative assessment and classified selectorate size as: (i) expanding selectorate with competitive elections; (ii) large selectorate with noncompetitive elections; and (iii) small selectorate with non-competitive elections.

Although the extent of religiosity varies, all the case studies, with the exception of Syria, have some element of religion within their institutions. Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain are considered Islamist governments and are stable compared with the secular governments overthrown during the Arab Spring. The transitional government in Egypt is less secular than the previous one, but the rise of Islamic Parties and a push for some Islamization are evident. Libya is on an even greater path toward Islamization based on the Libyan Council’s decision to impose Sharia Law. All of the stakeholders closest to the median, with the exception of Bashar al-Assad, have Islamic preferences for governance, an indication that the governments will either remain Islamic or transition in that direction if not yet so. Table 2 is the summary of our findings: that political survival (i.e., stability) is best achieved in MENA through the right proportion of private–public goods and an element of religiosity that is expressed either by religious parties themselves or in official partnership with the government at large.

Conclusions

Achieving stability and democracy in MENA is just one element within the broad array of the convergence of global interests in the region. The policy implications derived from the revised Selectorate Model are clear: The international community should clearly understand the implications of ushering in religious actors into the political process. Our analysis shows that the paths anticipated by the traditional stakeholder model do not hold when religion is added—authoritarian rather than democratic regimes are likely to emerge. There is no guarantee that democratic features will evolve as anticipated by the original Selectorate Model when religion is added to the mix.

During the Arab Spring, we assessed the feasibility of stabilizing the Middle East and spreading democratic principles as the selectorate expands. Our results show that the expansion of electoral coalitions is unlikely to create a democratic, liberal world in the Western image. Authoritarianism may be an intermediate end-state across the region.

Most of the region’s secular despots, with the exception of Syria, are now gone. In Egypt, Libya, and Iran, they were replaced by governments that are more religious yet based on a larger selectorate than the rulers they overthrew. As controversial as it may be, the MENA case studies indicate a potential conflict between stability and democracy. In nations that did not expand their
selectorate—Saudi Arabia and Bahrain—monarchies have preserved stable regimes. To maintain stability, both countries continue to preserve a small selectorate, provide large amount of private payoffs and public services based on their massive oil wealth, and incorporate ultraconservative religious themes into their governance. Shifts to expand the selectorate and move toward democracy are neither apparent, nor are they likely to be stable.

Egypt, Libya, and Iran all have expanded their selectorate substantially, but adopted different postures driven by religious considerations. Egypt, after the Morsi’s religious democratic experiment, is reverting toward a militaristic authoritarian rule despite a much enlarged selectorate. Libya remains an unstable and unfulfilled democratic experiment despite an expanded selectorate. Iran, after expanding the selectorate following the fall of the Shah, remains dominated by an authoritarian religious elite. These regimes are not on the path anticipated by the original Selectorate Model that moves them toward secular practices where democratic liberal principles flourish.

This analysis is only an initial exploration into the role of religion within the selectorate theory, but already provides useful clarifications that allow further understanding of MENA regime stability. We show that medium-term democratic tendencies can easily evaporate when religious preferences dominate a polity and stymie the evolution of democratic principles as selectorates expand. For academics and policymakers alike, the need to take into account the role of religion as nations evolve from autocracies to democracies—implied by the analysis across MENA regimes—is a pressing reality.

Acknowledgment

We gratefully acknowledge The TransResearch Consortium support for this project.

Notes

1We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for pointing out frequently compatible but alternate perspectives of the roots of the Arab Spring provided by Gilbert Achcar (2013), Charles Tripp (2013), Fawaz Gerges (2013), and Adib-Moghaddam (2014).

2The Senturion agent-based model was used in this analysis. We are grateful to Sentia Group Inc. for allowing use of this model. For details on Senturion, see Abdollahian et al. (2006) and Nunberg, Barma, Abdollahian, Green, and Pearlman (2010); for related models, Kugler and Feng (1997).

30 Harsh Military Autocracy and 200 Liberal Democracy.

4For Saudi Arabia, 0 is the current regime rather than a Harsh Autocracy.

5Named after the Muslim theologian Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab.

References


