

RELIGION OR TRADITION: The Lack of Modernisation in the Arab World

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Abstract

The spectacular upheavals in the Arab countries express the zest for modernisation in the Arab civilisation. It is an old quest that started when decline became undeniable in the 19th century. The call for modernisation has been only temporarily retarded by authoritarian trends and political Islam. There is nothing inherent in The Koran that negates the demand for democracy and affluence generated by the market economy.

Key words: democracy, rule of law I, rule of law II, gender empowerment, economic freedom, globalisation index, Gross National income, economic growth.

INTRODUCTION

The democratic revolution in several Arab countries that was initiated in late 2010 may be interpreted as a rational reaction to the process of decline that the Arab countries face in the period of globalization. It has been especially severe for the Arab countries that lack the economic rent that lifted the Gulf States out of poverty. Actually, the debate about a profound lack of modernization in the Arab world may be traced back to the 19th century, when many Arab scholars, writers and politicians stated that the Arab world must accept modernity and its institutions in order to keep up with other civilizations, especially the Europeans.

At the same time, another current in Arab culture started to launch the fundamentalist theory that only islamisation could break the trend of decline, economically as well as politically. The idea of an Islamic society – an Islamic state as well as an Islamic economy - was developed in the 20th century by groups in Pakistan (Mawdudi) and Egypt (Qutb, Faraj), outlining a completely different future for Islamic countries than the path of modernisation to a modern or post-modern society, based upon democracy and the market economy.

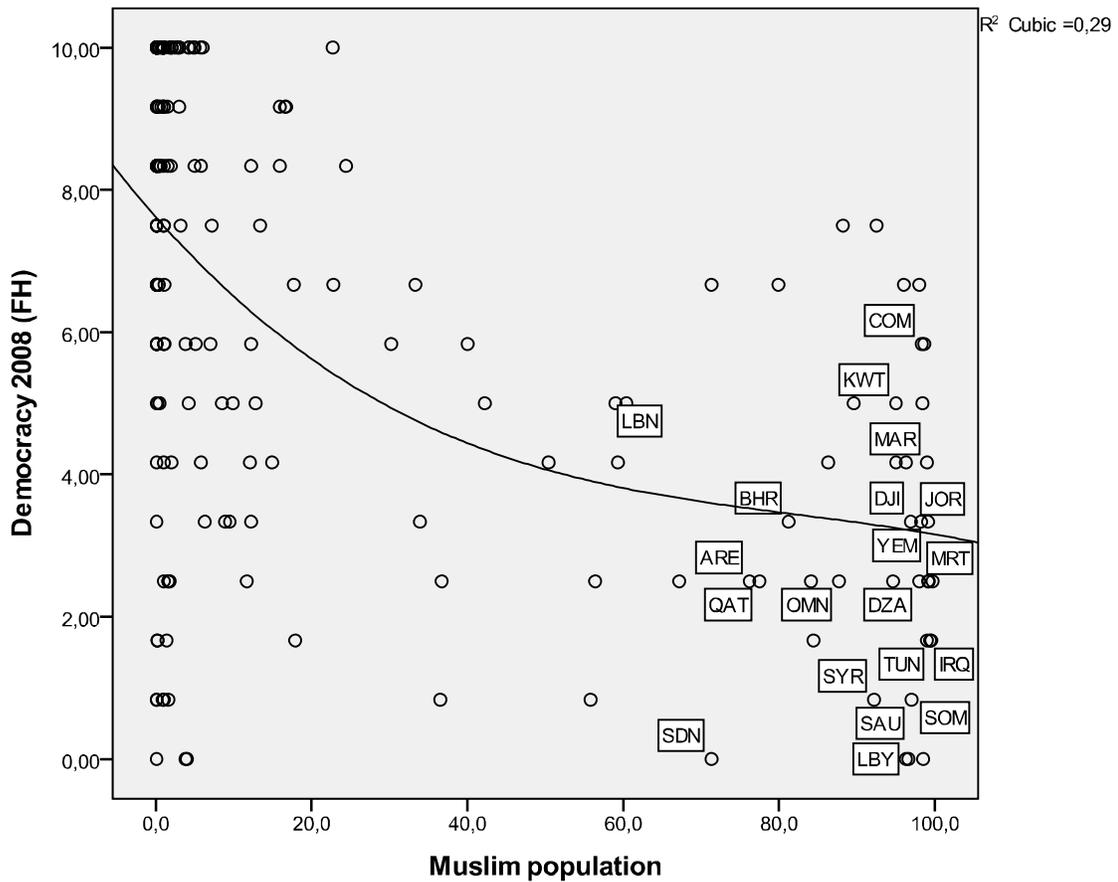
Analysing the lack of modernisation in the Arab world, one may debate how to account for the comparatively low scores of several of these states on a number of indices on aspects of modernisation. We will suggest that tradition trumps religion when explaining backwardness in large parts of the Arab world.

INDICES ON THE LACK OF MODERNISATION IN THE ARAB WORLD

One may employ some of the standard indices on social, political and economic development in order to tap the present situation in the Arab countries. First, we turn to the complex index on democracy, constructed by Freedom House and employed for measurement purposes over a few decades. In 1973, Freedom House launched its annual global survey of political rights

and civil liberties, Freedom in the World. Employing a methodology that had been devised by leading social scientists, the survey rated every country in the world on a series of indicators basic to freedom. Published annually, it offers a comparative view of various aspects of democracy, in which countries were measured across regional boundaries and from year to year. Figure 1 shows how the states in the Arab League perform in the early 21st century.

Figure 1. Democracy in the Arab World (Freedom House Index 2008)

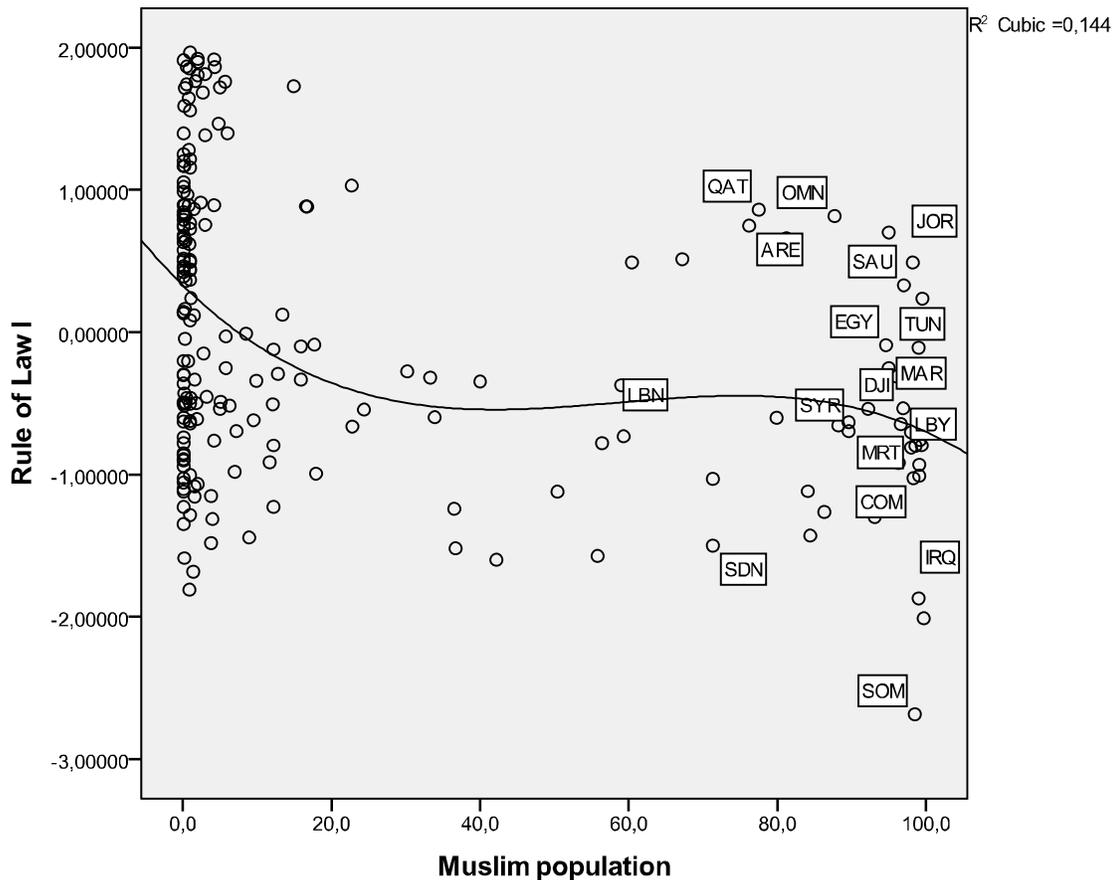


Note: Democracy 2008: Freedom House (2010) Freedom in the World, New York, NY: Freedom House; data available at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=439>
 Muslim population: Pew Forum (2009) MAPPING THE GLOBAL MUSLIM POPULATION: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population, October 2009, Washington, D.C., the Pew Forum; data available at: <http://pewforum.org/Mapping-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx>

The overall scores on a variety of aspects of democracy are low for the Arab countries with a few exceptions. One observes that Egypt displays a somewhat higher score than Tunisia, but both countries are solidly placed in the set of dictatorships.

Second, one may employ the data from the Governance project by the World Bank. Out of the six composite indices that the Governance project constructed and employed in a global mapping of some 200 countries, two are particularly relevant for democracy assessment. On the one hand, there is the integrity and autonomy of the legal system, measured by the aggregation of a host of indices such as the transparency index, the economic institution indices, and human rights indices such as habeas corpus. This Rule of Law I index taps how the court system operates in various countries, from the standpoint of the ideal of the *Rechtsstaat*.

Figure 2. Rule of Law I (due legal process) in the Arab World

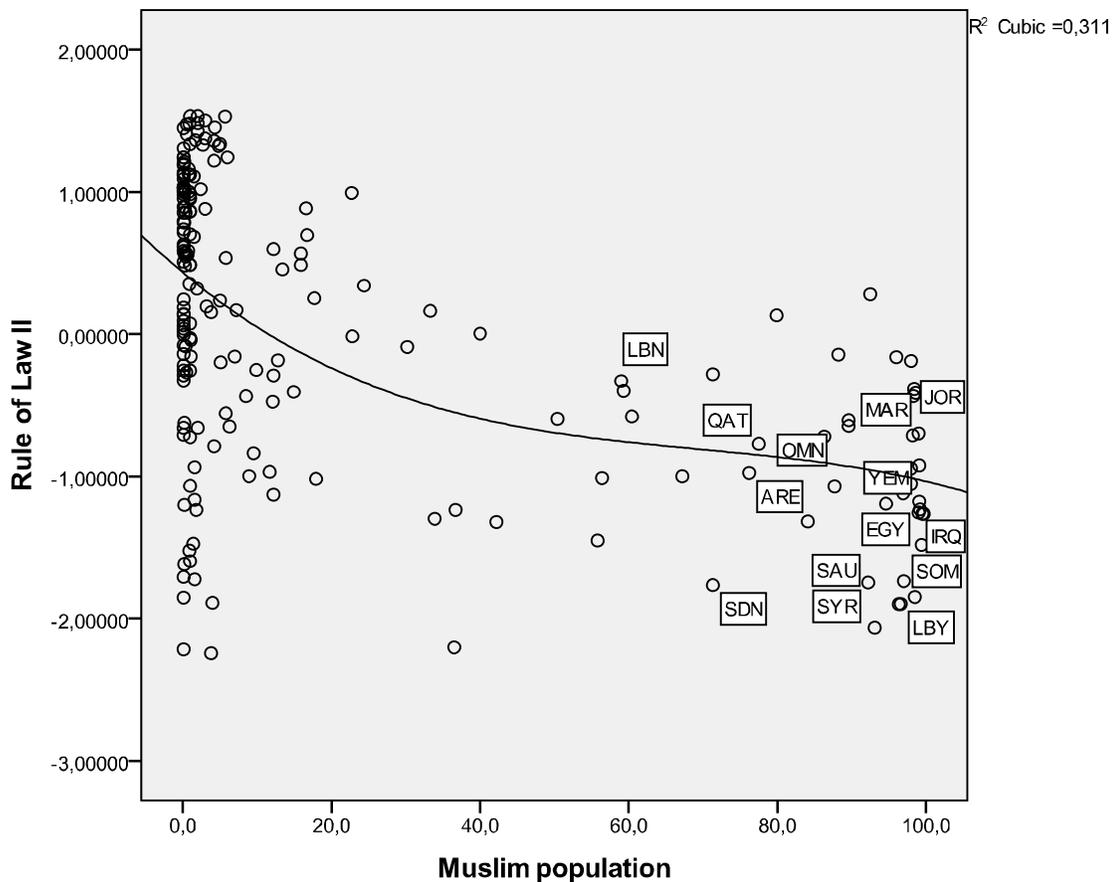


Note: Estimates of Rule of Law I as judicial autonomy according to World Bank, Governance Data, 2009; Muslim population: estimated percentage of population that is Muslim according to Pew Research Group, 2009.

According to the estimates of due legal process and judicial autonomy, the court systems in most Arab countries perform badly. The only exception is the set of superrich Gulf States, but these scorings may involve considerable overestimation.

On the other hand, the Governance project uses an index upon voice and accountability. It may be employed as an indicator upon democracy as free and fair elections, meaning representation of the people somehow and the derivation of law from the consent of Parliament or the national assembly. Figure 3 shows how Arab countries compare with other countries on democratic legitimacy: voice and accountability (Rule of Law II).

Figure 3. Rule of Law II: Voice and accountability in the Arab World

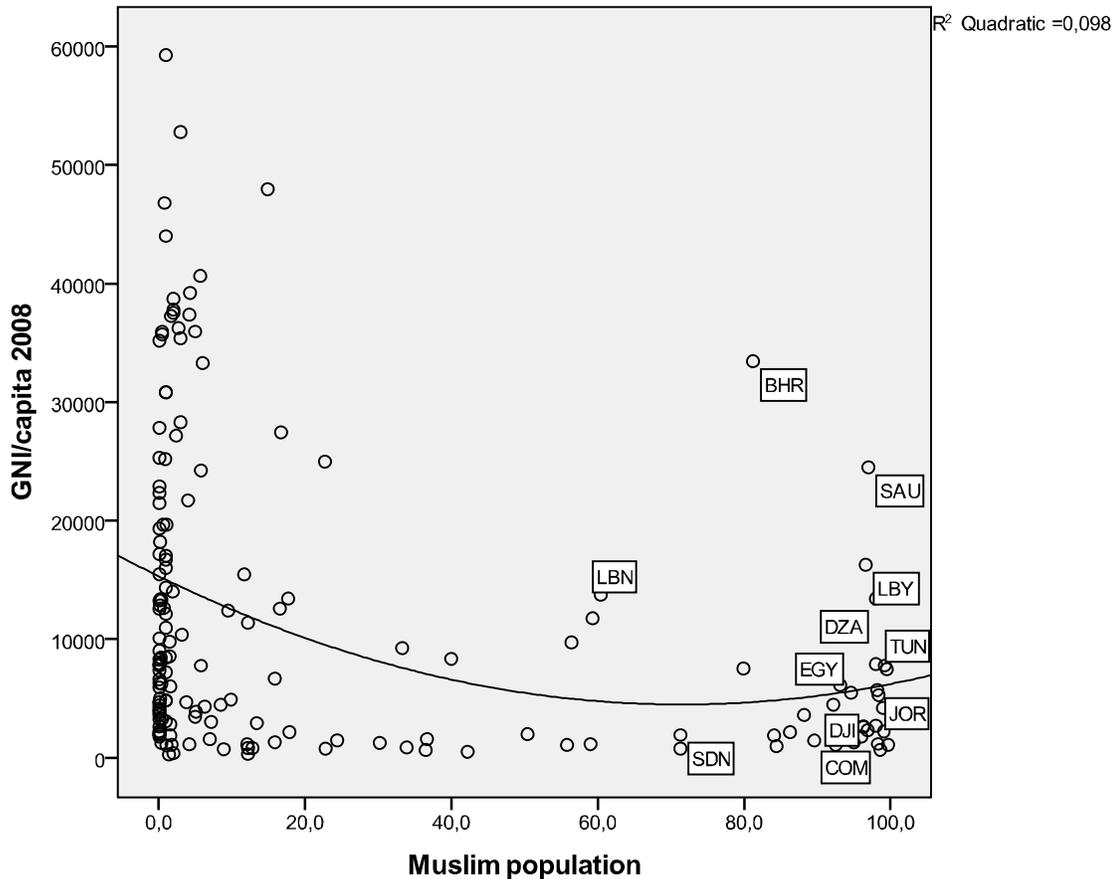


Note: Estimates of Rule of Law II as voice and accountability according to World Bank, Governance Data, 2009); Muslim population (estimated percentage of population that is Muslim according to Pew Research Group, 2009)

The comparative measures on voice and accountability puts the Arab countries low, where again Tunisia scores lower than Egypt. Globally speaking, one notes the profound lack of the various aspects of democracy in the Arab World, both rule of law as well as free and fair elections. It must be a burden for the population in these countries not to be able to expect legal predictability and not to be able to express their preferences freely for political parties.

One may wish to add the general economic situation in the Arab world to the performance evaluation of these countries, remembering that only the Gulf States have so-called *rentier economies*. Figure 4 shows the gross national income per capita in the Arab countries.

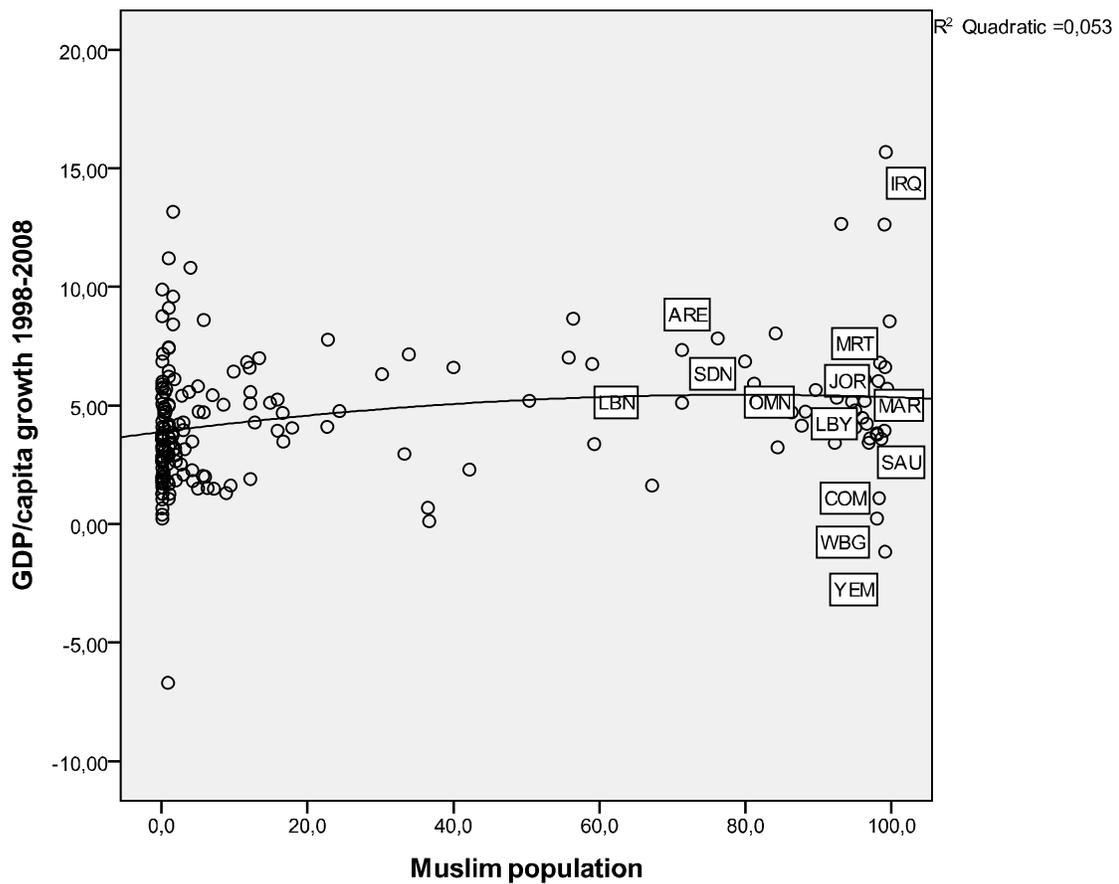
Figure 4. Gross National Income per capita in the Arab countries



Note: GNI per capita: World Bank (2010) World Development Indicators, Washington D.C.: World Bank; data available at: <http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do>

Excluding the *rentier economies*, the average person in the Arab world disposes of low income, in Egypt lower than in Tunisia. The population growth is strong, resulting in an incredible youth bulge that the overregulated economies do not arrive at integrating in terms of full-time employment. Actually, the rates of economic growth in many Arab countries do to suffice for a rapidly growing population, resulting in an enormous youth bulge.

Figure 5 displays the average economic growth rates for the Arab countries during the last decade.

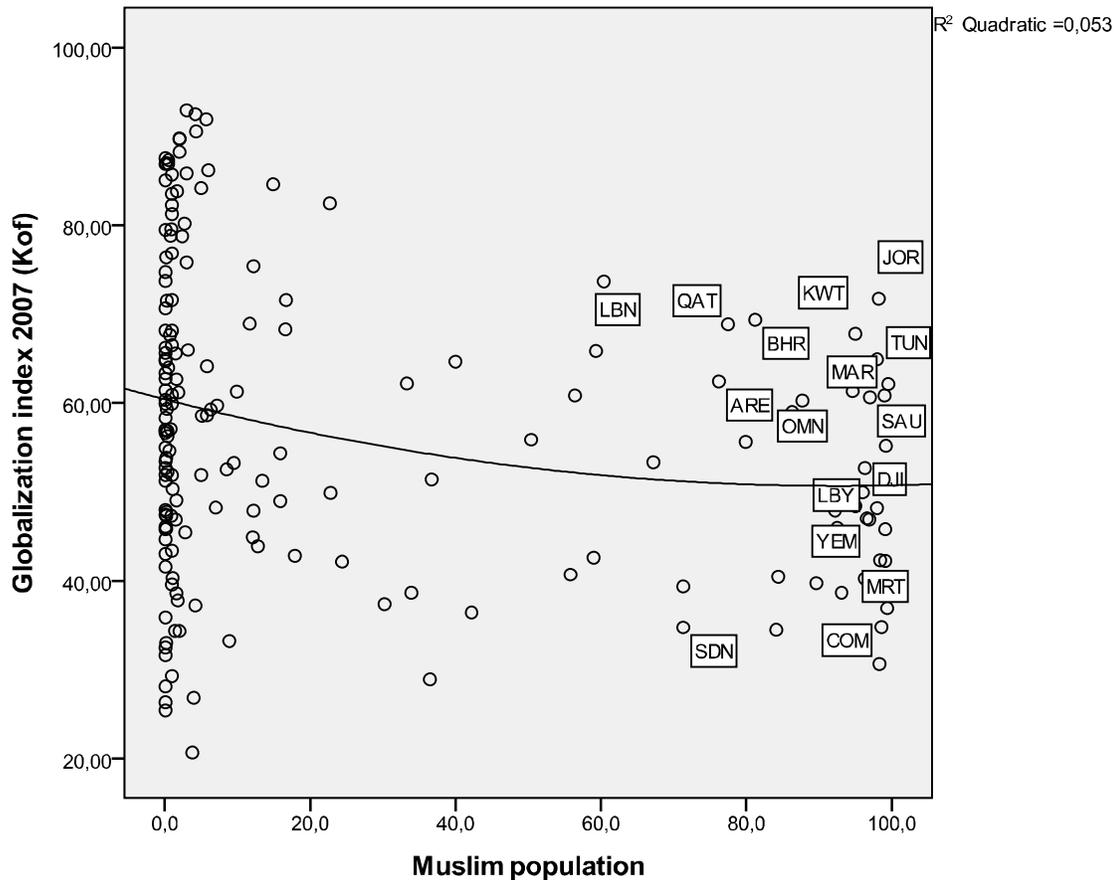


Note: Real GDP growth 1998-2008: ERS (2010) International Macroeconomic Data Set, Washington, DC: Economic Research Service, USDA; data available at: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Data/Macroeconomics/>

Although economic growth is positive in most Arab countries in the last ten years, their economies are not dynamic enough to maintain the average living standards of the population, given the birth explosion and the youth bulge. It is the combination of the lack of human rights and weak economic development that creates the strong sources for social and political unrest in the Arab world, as the process of globalisation makes it easy for the

population in these countries to compare their situation with that in other civilisations. Figure 6 shows that the Arab countries are rather integrated in the global economy or the *global village*.

Figure 6. The Arab countries according to the Globalisation index



Note: KOF Globalization index: Dreher, Axel (2006): Does Globalization Affect Growth? Evidence from a new Index of Globalization, *Applied Economics* 38, 10: 1091-1110; data available at: <http://globalization.kof.ethz.ch/>

A FEW EXPLANATIONS OR THEORIES OF ARAB BACKWARDNESS

The analysis of the backwardness of the Arab countries, combining an authoritarian regime with a weak economic development with the exception of the Gulf states, where the economic rent from oil and gas exports push these countries to engage in massive conspicuous consumption, may list a few factors that help account for the Arab situation today. As we believe that tradition is far more important than religion for the Arab average outcomes, we emphasize tradition at the expense of Islam.

i) No Political Rationalisation: Tradition and Charisma

Speaking generally, there exist only three kinds of political authority, as Weber elaborated in the “*Herrschaftssoziologie*”, namely: legal-rational, charismatic and traditional authority. Weber regarded the bureaucracy as the hallmark upon the modern state with its legal-rational authority, but an alternative interpretation would link the legal-rational type of political authority with constitutionalism. The Arab countries are governed by either traditional authority or charismatic authority, almost with no exception. Why is that so? When traditional rule is crushed by means of charisma and the military coup, then is replaced by charismatic authoritarianism, tending towards the creation of a new dynasty. Never is the constitutional document respected. Instead constitutions are made and unmade, changed or suspended. At the end of the day, authoritarianism remains in place.

ii) Law and the legal order

The lack of constitutionalism in the sense of government under the laws that restrain the exercise of power is exacerbated by the strong position of revealed law – *Sharia* – in the legal systems of Arab countries. Some of these countries have rational system of law – civil law or common law – but Islamic law has made strong inroads lately.

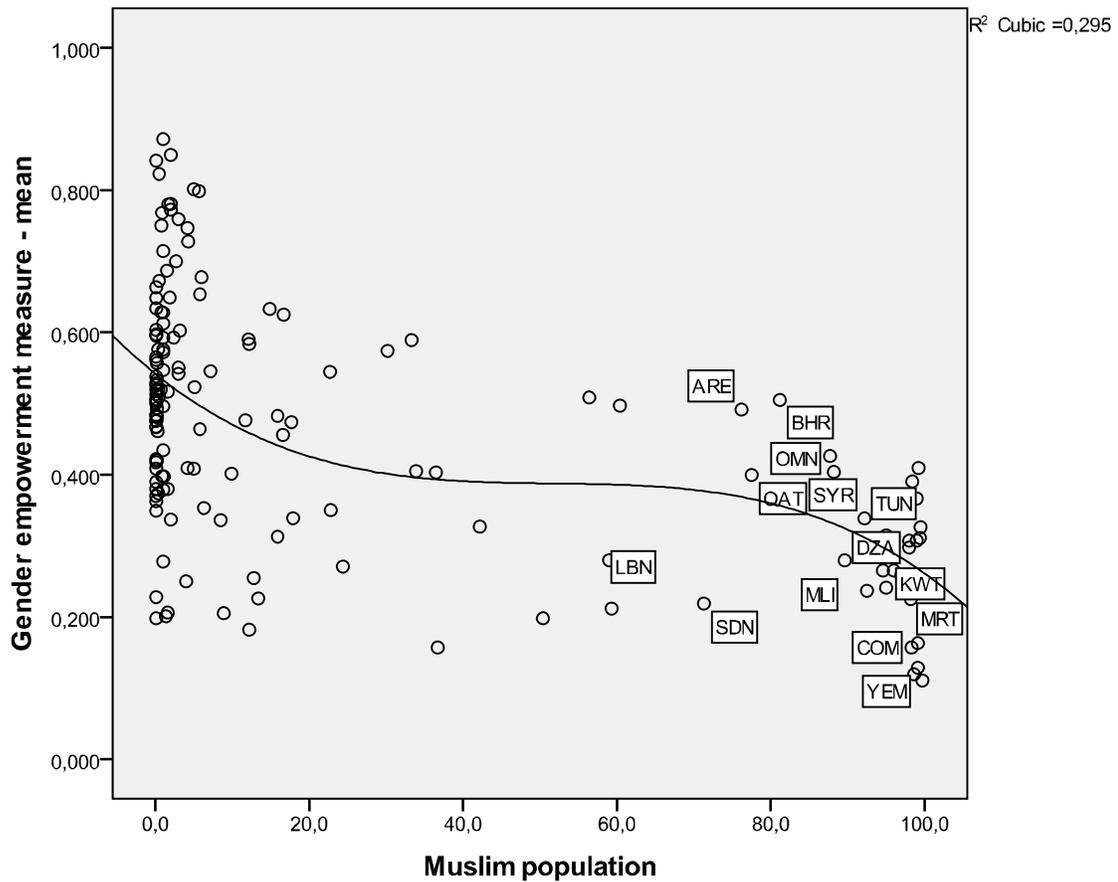
One objection often raised against Islamic Law is that it is very old-fashioned, laid down in the 9th and 10th centuries in the form of four schools of jurisprudence – the so-called *fiqh*. Although it is always stated that the gate of interpretation has been for ever closed, Islamic law has developed in various ways, using different kinds of methods, even tricks, to update the legal order so that law can adapt to the changes in society.

Yet, this way of adapting law to the social evolution comes with a price, namely a fundamental arbitrariness typical of *Qadi-justiz*, as Weber called Islamic Law. There is simply too much discretion when the Islamic court applies old rules, making it difficult to predict the outcome for ordinary people. The outcome is a fundamental feeling of uncertainty concerning legal matters, whether public or private law ones.

iii) Family system

One may make a sharp distinction between two types of family systems: individualistic and collectivistic ones, following the concepts introduced by Todd (1983). In the ideal-type of an individualistic family system, the children leave the family house at the age of 18-21, becoming legal subjects fully. And they start managing their own lives. The parents cannot count upon being cared for at old age. It has been argued that such an individualistic family promotes democracy in general. However, the family system in the Arab countries tends to be of the collectivistic kind. It is a drag upon gender empowerment, which is low in the Arab countries – see Figure 7.

Figure 7. Gender empowerment in the Arab countries



Note: Gender Empowerment Measure (mean values): UNDP (2010) HDR 2010 Statistical Tables, New York: UNDP; data available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/data/>

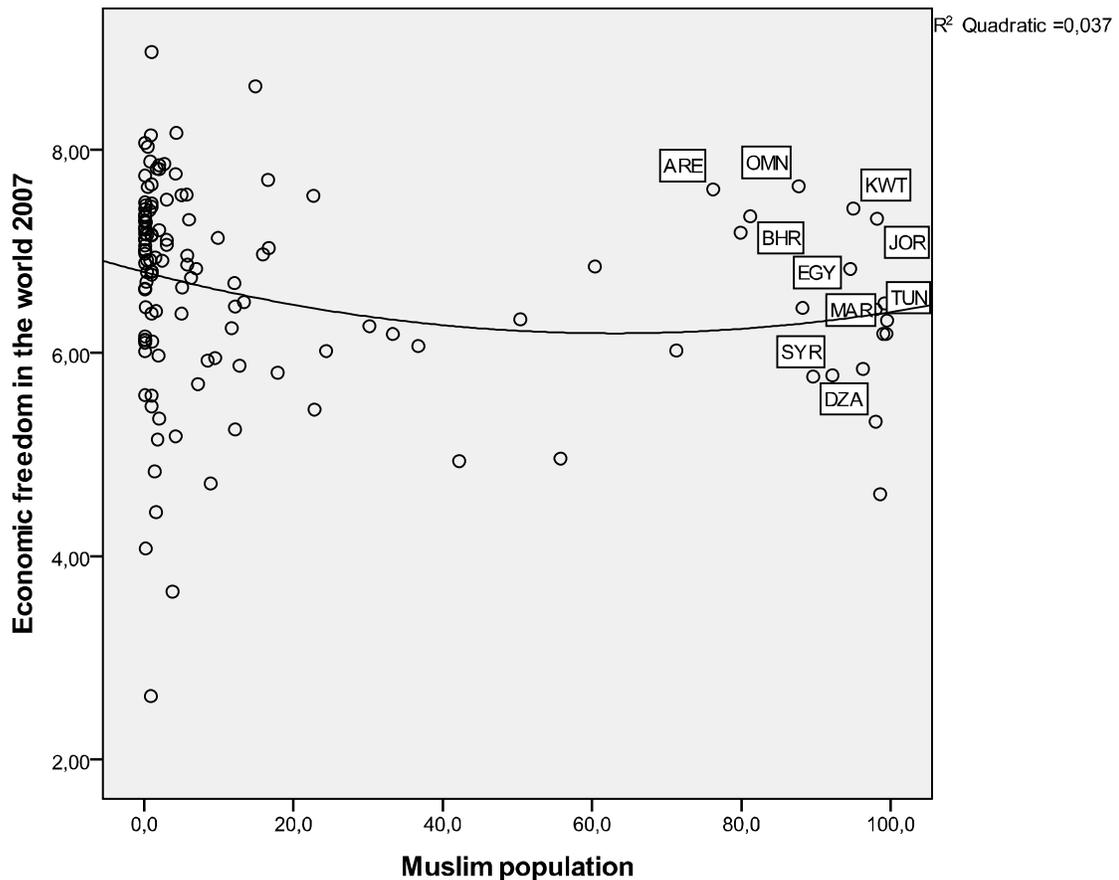
It is obvious from Figure 6.7 that the overall predicament of Muslim women is not an easy one. Also the economic institutions are run with a collectivist bend.

iv) Economic institutions

The Arab countries have never endorsed fully the market economy with its competitive individualism. Instead, they all practice state-capitalism, meaning that government regulates the economy in detail and the state is often a large owner of land, factories and banks. The outcome is an economy focusing upon the favours that the president and his entourage can give when accepting permits or applying regulations. State-capitalism tends to degenerate into various forms, simple or elegant ones, of looting and corruption. What has thus far come out about the fortunes amassed by Tunisian Ben Ali and the Egyptian Mubarak family indicates, even if numbers are exaggerated, that mass poverty in these countries is not the

only aspect of their distribution of income and wealth. Especially, in Egypt a middle class is lacking. Economic growth cannot be driven only by the luxury spending of a small super rich top strata – a clique. Figure 8 displays the extent of economic freedom, according to one of the standard indices upon the enforcement of market institutions.

Figure 8. Economic freedom in the Arab world



Note: Economic Freedom of the World: James D. Gwartney, Joshua C. Hall, and Robert Lawson (2010). Economic Freedom of the World: 2010 Annual Report. Vancouver, BC: The Fraser Institute; data available at: http://www.freetheworld.com/datasets_efw.html

The extent of economic freedom – the scope for the institutions of lawful capitalism – is narrow in Arab countries, with the exception of the *rentier economies*. Only the market economy can deliver the jobs necessary in relation to the immense youth bulge.

v) Colonisation – Heritage of violence

Against the explanations above, focusing upon Arab traditionalism and other internal factors, one can argue that these explanations bypass a most fundamental experience that most Arab countries share, although with somewhat different memories, namely European colonialism. What have stalled the development of Arab countries is the external domination and the attending fight against it, resulting in legitimating the use of physical violence and other forms of repression.

There are various versions of this dependency approach, or *orientalism*, as it is called with regard to the Arab countries. Whether Weber could be designated as an orientalist, considering his sepsis about Arab traditions and perhaps also with regard to the religion of Mohammed, has not been debated in the literature. Said in his investigations in orientalism, culture and colonialism made no reference to the writings of Weber on Islam and Arabia, despite the strongly negative views of Weber on many aspects of Arab culture.

vi) Religion: *Fitna*

Adducing Islam has contributing to Arab backwardness would be entirely unwarranted, because religious practice is not strongly related to religion as a set of doctrines. After all, religion is what men and women make of it. What counts are interpretation of the so-called Holy Book as well as the formation of social practice under the influence of tradition.

The interpretation of the Koran launched by the fundamentalists is based upon an approach to Arab decline that seeks the solution in going backward, to Arabia of the four *Righteous* Caliphs. This is *Salafism*, but the 20th century fundamentalism in Pakistan and Egypt has added the notion of *jihad* to salafism – the hidden duty (Faraj). Political Islam entails total islamisation of state and society, according to the ideas of Maududi and Qutb. It will not bring modernization – democracy and affluence – to the Arab world.

CONCLUSION

Stable democracy in the Arab world is only possible when two conditions are met. Firstly, there must be substantial numbers of democrats, i.e. people who adhere to the democratic regime. Second, constitutionalist rules must meet with respect and enforcement, not only as a matter of tactics but also as a concern for legitimacy. The first condition refers to the preferences of the players and groups who are active today in Arab politics. The second condition is an institutionalist one, focusing upon the rules of the political game that are laid down not merely in constitutional *formalia* but also in constitutional *realia*.

Authoritarianism in the Arab world is motivated by the fear of religious fundamentalism. The one supports the other, but the outcome is the same, namely no modernization. Arab countries can only undo this dilemma when considerable groups of people start adhering to democratic values, unhindered by religion. For the first time after independence, large masses of people in Arab countries display democratic preferences, calling for the institutions of the

rule of law regime as well as economic reforms that make it possible for small people to prosper.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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