Islam, Bread Riots and Democratic Reforms in North Africa

Anwar Alam

Debates on democratization in the region of West Asia and North Africa (WANA) in recent years have centered around the examination of three hypotheses: the linkage between economic liberalization/globalization and democratization, Islam and democracy and civil society and democratization. A bulk of literatures examining this set of linkages ends up by providing perspectives on the ‘failure of democratization’ or conversely ‘survival of authoritarian regimes’ in the Arab world including the region of North Africa, highlighting the factor of ‘Arab exceptionalism’. In broad term, scholars working into this area do no see prospect of democratization in Arab world beyond what is called ‘controlled political liberalization’ or ‘survival strategy of autocratic regimes’. There is an emerging consensus that the ‘third wave of democratization’, that began in the aftermath fall of communist regimes in Russia and other East European countries, has bypassed the Arab world and scholars has began to conclude that the authoritarianism is the ‘modal form of governance’ in the region of WANA. What is problematic in such conclusions and discourses is that they mostly emphasized/examined the role of external variables (US, EU, globalisation, international organizations etc) and has paid less importance to the internal variables (political crisis, important events etc), if not totally ignored, while examining the progression of democratic reforms in the Arab world. Though the linkage between ‘crisis’ and ‘political opening’ in the Arab world has been widely observed but with an understanding that such political opening was merely designed to co-opt the disgruntled sections of society and legitimise the political rule. However not many serious studies have been conducted to examine the role of specific political events in facilitating the process of democratization in the Arab world.

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This paper, while acknowledging the role of external factors, examines the role of internal factors in triggering the process of democratic reforms in the Arab world that began in early 1980s. In particular, the paper will examine the role of Bread/Food Riots (the frequent and most common form of socio-political anomie in Arab world) in bringing the agenda of democratic reforms at national level in many of the Arab countries. In other words, it will highlight the linkage between bread riots and political liberalization in the Arab world. This hypothesis is derived from two observations. First, democratization is understood here as a process of ever expanding of people’s rights in various sphere of life. Second, mobilization and participation of masses has been crucial for the diffusion of democratic rule across many societies/ nations of the world. This may be confirmed from the study of many social and democratic movements including human rights, civil rights, blacks, feminist, gay, and environmentalist and so on. The subsequent analysis would be confined to four states of North Africa: Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. The selection of these four countries of North Africa is based on two premises. First, bread riots are epidemic in this part of the Arab world. Second, within the Arab world they were the first to take the initiatives towards political reform in the mid 1980s. Third, Islamists pose the most severe threat to the regimes in these countries and influence the discourse of democracy, democratization and secularism.

**Significance of Food Subsidies in Arab World**

Most basic needs such as food, medicine, energy, clothing, as well as education, housing, and health are subsidised, or made charge-free, by a majority of state in the Arab countries. Food subsidy occupies an important position in the economies of the Arab countries and becomes a volatile issue in the context of demographic changes. The pressure exerted by demographic factors is really effective. These factors are: high population growth, large family size, and significant portion of population are under working age. The combination of these factors leads to higher dependency ratio in one hand and higher effective demand
for food on the other. When these factors are coupled with increasing rural-urban migration and declining agricultural production this leads to a situation in which an increasing proportion of demand for food has to be met by imports. During the 1970s the bill of imported foodstuff have increased substantially and created serious and unprecedented drains on government coffers. The decade of the 1980s was not better at all. The aggregate imports of various agricultural products of the Arab countries have increased from US$ 21.8 billion in 1980 to US$ 22.4 billion in 1985 and to US$ 23.3 in 1990. In fact if one excludes the rich Gulf states, most of the other Arab countries have imported more of agricultural products and foodstuff in 1990 than in 1980, and in terms of magnitude Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia stand on the top of the list. Furthermore, the overall Arab ratio of dependence on imported food, which indicates the food security and vulnerability to external shocks, had deteriorated from 21.7% during the period 1969/71 to 38.1% 1986/87.

It needs to be emphasized here that food share in the households' budget is very significant, hence food subsidies had an immediate and direct impact on livelihood of the household and its standard of living, and it therefore had a net redistributive effects. According to Morrision food subsidies constituted 20% of the expenditure of the urban poor households in Morocco. And since the poor spent 80% of their budget on food, their food consumption would have fallen by one-quarter without subsidies. On average the Moroccan families spend 40% of its annual income on food. In rural Egypt, the reliance on food subsidies was substantial. On the national level, food amounted to 50% of the Egyptian households' consumption.

Since the beginning of 1980s governments in North Africa have been implementing market oriented reforms inspired by what is called 'Washington Consensus'. Morocco led the change with its 1983 International Monetary Fund (IMF)-sponsored programme, followed by Tunisia (1985), Egypt (1987) and then Algeria (1989). Most started with a stabilization
 programme, followed by structural adjustment, limited privatization, and encouragement of foreign investment. Since the mid 1980s, a post-structural adjustment agenda has emerged, where the key issues are adaptation to global financial liberalization, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. One of the consequences of the process of market oriented economic reforms is the increasing dismantling of subsidies on popular commodities. Education remains the last service for which subsidies are still fairly, ranging between 7 percent (Algeria and Tunisia) and 5 percent (Morocco and Egypt,) of the gross domestic product in 1995. Food subsidies as a percentage of GDP for the same year are markedly lower than they were in the 1960s to the mid 1980s. In case of Egypt, food subsidies which constituted about 17% of total Egyptian public expenditure in the mid 1980s had went down to about 2 per cent in 1990. Yemen is the only Arab country in which 1995 social expenditure on food subsidies as a percentage of GDP is still relatively high (10.4%). It is lower than 1 percent in Algeria; lower than 2 percent in Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt; lower than 3 percent in Jordan. According to Qaiser Khan of the World Bank’s Middle East and North Africa Region, subsidies no longer cover fine bread, and limited quantities of subsidized inferior bread is distributed in the poorer areas—where queuing is essential. Like Egypt, Morocco subsidies inferior flour, sugar, and cooking oil. Algeria in 1996 switched to a system of means-tested cash transfers aiming to reach the neediest of all. Tunisia’s formerly universal subsidy system ceded to a self-targeting type through lower-quality packaging but not inferior commodities.

Bread Riots and Its Political implications

The dynamics and the socio-political adverse effects of the austerity and subsidy options are illustrated by what Arab countries have experienced in the ‘nation-wide’ violent "bread" or "urban riots" in recent years: Egypt, January 1977, 1984, 1986, 1989 ; Morocco, 1981, January 1984; Sudan, March 1985; Algeria, October 1988; Tunisia, 1984, 1986;

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Jordan, April 1989. In addition to these major events, localized, small scale food riots have been occurring throughout 1990s and even in 2000s in all these countries. They were provoked by austerity measures linked to one form or another of structural adjustments, stabilization, liberalization and privatization programmes resulting in sudden rises in food and fuel prices.

These riots, have rendered the Arab governments to be more careful in adjusting food subsidies. Thus, in Egypt the five fold rise in bread price has led to serious food riots that claimed eleven lives in April 2008 after clash with the army. The government response included allocating $ 2.5 billion of its new budget for bread subsidies, imposing a ban on rice exports, and ordering the army to bake and distribute bread to the poor. Public sector wages were also increased by 30 percent. In October 1980 Morocco embarked on a second stabilisation programme and concluded an agreement with the IMF according to which the food subsidies were reduced and that had led to 50% increase in the prices of essential consumer goods. Again these price increases had sparked widespread riots in Casablanca in the spring of 1981 and, together with other factors such as drought and falling phosphate prices, forced the government to abandon the programme. When riots broke out again in response to price increases in January 1984 the government, once more, abandoned its plan to introduce sudden price increase. More recently in May 2008 violent protest over the cost of bread prompted the Morroco government to annual a 30 percent hike so as to avoid the 1981 Casablanca riots. In Algeria, a 15 percent salary increase for civil servants was introduced in response to a doubling of the price of cooking oil, sugar, and flour. In Tunisia also the "bread riots", January 1984, were strong enough to forced the policy maker to repeal the reduction in food subsidy. Even in 1986 when the sever fiscal and foreign exchange crisis made the government to accept the IMF recommendations, the decision maker was careful not to let the consequences of these recommendations to be shouldered by the working class. By undertaking the price-wage parity option, the Tunisian authorities had allowed wage rates to be steadily increased to keep pace with inflation.
addition to this measure, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria, have established non-governmental organizations and community sponsored project for the creation of jobs and provisions of additional training and health services.

In all these countries, riots are triggered by soaring food prices, housing shortages, high unemployment, and in Algeria, even rationing of water supplies. In Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia, the trends since the mid-1970s up to the mid 1980s had been of rising prices and declining living standards for a significant percentage of the population. For instance, Morocco’s cost-of food index more than tripled between 1973 and 1983 and in the mid-1980s it was estimated that more than 40 percent of the country’s population was living below the poverty level. Around the same period, some 35 percent of Tunisia’s total labor force was either unemployed or underemployed, and a high percentage of households in the southern interior live at or below the level of basic subsistence. The examples of Algeria and Egypt are equally instructive: soaring foreign debt high unemployment, housing crises and heightened social polarization between rich and poor.

Islam, Social Contract and Bread Riots

In this context it needs to emphasize that bread riots are an economic and political phenomenon. The protests following the withdrawal of subsidies for strategic commodities (sugar, tea, kerosene, flour, bread) and price hikes can mislead if they are interpreted strictly as ‘rebellions of the belly’. In all cases, these intifida amounted to protest against social inequality, corruption, nepotism, authoritarianism and the regime’s incompetence. Edward Thompson makes a number of interesting suggestions that have relevance not only for the pre-modern but also for the contemporary Arab world. He opposes the claim that the food protests in 18th century England were mob or riot activities; that they were just “rebellions of the belly” or responses to economic hardship. According to his ‘moral economy of the poor’, the lower strata had the right to livelihood and economic justice,

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partly legitimated by paternalistic support of the authorities\textsuperscript{xv}. They were not to be undermined or compromised by dealing, milling, or marketing activities that could cause high rises in the prices of bread or other strategic commodities. These food protests, then, were not compulsive but self activating. In fact, they were, “highly complex forms of direct popular action, disciplined and with clear objectives”\textsuperscript{xvi}. It is this ‘moral economy of poor’ that Islamists across the Arab world including the North Africa emphasized while opposing the policies of incumbent governments. Quran itself lays the importance on the moral economy of the poor. There are clear Quranic injunctions against tabdhir (excessive consumerism), usury, and the theft and the kind of unfair dealing, milling or marketing activities that could lead to exploitation of the have-nots. One injunction commands Muslims to “keep up the balance with equity”. More specifically, Quran exhorts the devout to practice infaq fi sabil Allah—that is, to spend in God’s way, ie, the idea that all bounty belongs to God. Hence the verse: “Allah is the best of Providers”. This Godly bounty, or ni'am (favours), must be managed in accordance with God’s sanctions by balancing the earthly with the heavenly as well as the individual with the communal. Most Islamists point out that a Muslims’s wealth is governed by communal obligation that stress the haqq (right) of al-miskin (the needy or the poor), al-yatim (the orphan) and ibn al sabil (the way farer). Thus the Quran not only obligates Muslims to pay zakat (the poor rate); it also resonates with exhortations to the believers to engage in other voluntary gift giving known as sadaqat.

Formulations of social justice in Islam may vary in practice and scope according to context, but what makes its conception paradigmatically distinct and common to all Muslim societies is its community based redistributive system. Through this system, the offsetting of material inequalities and injustice is equally binding on all members and groups constituting the Islamic community. Inequalities are attended to through voluntary donations and obligatory taxes for the poor. Injustices are managed by way of observing godly laws governing fair trading as well as through more formal legal and administrative

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means. For inequality to become just and Islamically acceptable, a portion of the benefits of material bounty bestowed upon the rich Muslims by God must be passed of the needy. The general welfare of the umma is contingent upon tarahum (mutual compassion). This is the reason that social welfare has always been a top priority for Islamic movements throughout the world. It is within this ‘Islamic moral economy of poor’ that all Islamists contrast the normative Islamic justice system with the inequalities and injustices spurred by the government’s policy of infitah.

On the socio-political level food subsidies in the Arab world has been seen as part of a tacit social contract between the state and the people, and the people exercises power by threatening to destabilize the political situation and challenges regime's legitimacy if the government violates its commitment in the social contract. The issue of food subsidy as part of the social contract has been expressed, mostly in Egypt, by claiming that "bread is not an economic commodity; it is a social and political commodity"xvii. The social imagery of this contract is best encapsulated by the popular Maghribi saying, nakul al-qut nistanna al-mut (food we eat, until death we meet) and the Arab term dimuqra티yyat al-khubz (democracy of bread). In a wider context the "social contract", as put by Waterbury, "is centered on the commitment of the state to provide goods and services to the public in exchange for political docility and quiescence"xviii. Essentially, its chief premise is that post independence Arab rulers have been paid political deference by their peoples in return for the provision of publicly subsidized services----education, health care, and a state commitment to secure employment. Political deference has been traded for khubz or ‘bread’ used here in generic sense to refer free education, health care, and other services. As an explanatory tool, the concept of dimuqra티yyat al-khubz is significant in that it stresses the socio-economic basis of Arab political power: Arab authoritarianism has reproduced itself not by relying solely one brute force, but also by relying on ‘elements of negotiation and accommodations”. Since the khubz-iste is quietist only in so far as the state is providential, economic downturns have eroded the providential platform of Arab

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politics. Subsequently, under societal pressure, the tacit contract between ruler and ruled has become tenuous, leading to involuntary relaxation of control from the top in the form of ambiguous politics of renewal—limited participation and contestation—the clear purpose of which has thus far been the survival of regime.

The khubz-istes' disaffection with inexorably deteriorating economic and living conditions and its associated Islamic social imagery of relationship between ruler and ruled (as stated above) can be singled out as the main factor that creates a socially and politically explosive atmosphere. It is against the backdrop of economic malaise that khubz-istes and dissident forces take to the streets en masse. In these protests, the people's taste for participatory politics is nurtured, and their dissidence is unleashed by directly challenging political authority. The Algerian riots of 1988 are instructive: From the cities of the coast to oases of the Sahara, Algerians went on the rampage and destroyed whatever, in their eyes; represented the regime: city halls, police stations, courts----They also vented their rage on the political headquarters of the country's only legal party, the FLN----. Inevitably, stores were ransacked and cars burned, turning the main commercial streets of Algiers into scenes of devastation. This description of riots also resemble the Egyptian riots of 18-19 January 1977: for two days, rioters attacked targets that symbolized the prosperity of the middle class and the corruption of the regime, shouting slogans like, "Yā batl al-`ubūr, fēn al-futūr?" ("Hero of the Crossing, where is our breakfast?") and "Thieves of the Infitah, the people are famished." There were also shouts of "Nasser, Nasser." Some 800 people were killed and many more injured. The rioting ended when the state abruptly canceled the new policies. Similar incidents also happened in other parts of North Africa.

**Political Reforms in North Africa**

These riots or what is called the collapse of dimuqratiyyat al-khubz provided a catalyst for political reforms that followed in these North African nations. In fact these riots can be interpreted as kinds of indirect elections in countries where no pluralists politics existed till recently. Street uprisings amounted to vote of no confidence against the incumbent
regimes. These rioters rebelled to express the wide feelings among the hitherto anonymous masses of ingratitude towards their regimes, which still based their legitimacy on past achievements of little relevance to the people’s present struggle for khubz. These riots, despite economic roots have definite political content and motivation. According to Cooper, Egypt’s 1977 riots had ‘signs of organization [with] identical anti-regime literature appear[ing] simultaneously across the----- country---[of] systematic attempts to cut internal communications----[of] coordinated attacks on neighboring police stations --[of] selectivity of targets, concentrating on state propertyxx. Seddon draws similar conclusions about evidence of political organizations in the bread riots of Morocco and Tunisia in 1984 and 1985xxi. In the context of Egypt it was the famous 1977 bread riots that played a major role in creating the national-political context that forced the government to initiate the political reforms. The democratic strings that began with division of ASU (Arab Socialist Union—the only legal party to context election prior to its dissolution in 1978) into three parties – left, centre and right -- during the Sadat regime was continued throughout the Mubarak period with periodic ups and downs depending upon the context. The Mubarak regime in Egypt liberalized the political sphere, releasing those imprisoned during Sadat’s period and opening of dialogue of them. Even the Muslim Brotherhood was tolerated (although not legalized) and members were allowed to stand in all subsequent elections either for National Assembly or the boards of various professional syndicates. In fact, professional syndicates became an arena of relatively free speech and assemblyxxii. There were six opposition parties in 1980s that was increased to ten by the end of 1990s and now stands at 17 of which all had gained legal status through appeals of PPC decision. Throughout the 1980s the supreme constitutional court challenged the domination of the regime over political and civil life. A constitutional challenge to the elections on the basis that they had excluded independent candidates resulted in the dissolution of the national assembly, an amendment to the electoral law and the holding of elections in 1987. Another constitutional amendment removed all restrictions on independent candidates and early elections in 1990xxiii. Since 2000 all elections in Egypt has held under partial judicial

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supervision, which helped to eliminate some of the more blatant irregularities related to vote rigging. More recently in 2005 President Hosni Mubarak amended Article 76 of the Constitution to allow multi-candidate presidential elections in Egypt. The normal civil and criminal courts are generally competent, fair and independent of the executive. Trials are open and procedural safeguards are usually observed in these courts except political and security cases that are tried in either military or State Security Courts. Under pressure from members and organizations of civil society the President Mubarak declared in 2003 that the government will submit a bill to the Parliament for the elimination of the State Security Courts, leaving in place the emergence military courts to try only cases of terrorism, and conspiracies designed to destabilize the regime. However the proposed legislation is still pending.

The process of political liberalization in Tunisia in 1987 took place in the background of 1986 food riots. Political reforms in this country followed the ouster of the former and ailing president, Bourguiba, by Zine Al Abidine Ali in 1987. Soon after the coup, he introduced limits on pretrial detention. Moved to abolish the post of general prosecutor and the state security court, and released hundreds of political prisoners xxiv. He promised political openness and respect for human rights. Four leaders of the LTDH (Tunisian Human Rights League) were given ministerial appointments in the new government xxv. He opened a dialogue with the opposition forces, including the Islamists and proposed a national pact to discuss issues of national identity, the political system, economic development and foreign policy. This was signed by six organized political parties as well as representatives of several civil-society organizations, potentially preparing for “a more elaborate corporatist formula with a growing pluralist potential xxvi. Since April 1989 the multiparty parliamentary election has held periodically.

In Algeria the 1988 bread riots was crucial factor in forcing the then Algerian President, Chadli Bendjedid, to pursue a course of liberalizing reforms. In October 1988, President

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Chadli Benejedid announced free representation in elections and the creation of post of prime minister. These reforms were endorsed by a popular referendum, paving the way for amendments to the constitutions in February 1989. The new constitution provided freedom of association and assembly (including the formation of associations of ‘political character’), freedom of expression, judicial independence, and the right to strike. A new electoral law paved the way for local elections to take place in 1990 and parliamentary election in 1991 that saw the FIS winning the absolute majority but denied the opportunity to form the government by military junta. In addition, the regime abolished the state security court which had been used to try those accused of political crimes, released political detainees, and even appeared to cease the practice of torture. These reforms stimulated new activism and paved the way for associational life to flourish. Though the presidential elections of 1999 were flawed by the fact that Abdelaziz Bouteflika ran opposed, the 2004 presidential election were contested by six candidates; monitored by foreign observers and were considered generally fair. Similarly Morocco, King Muhammad VI infused national discourse in the 1980s with pledges of multiparty competition and release of dissidents in the background of 1984 food riots. King Hassan II took the first steps down this path during the last years of his long reign, and his son Mohammed VI continued the process after ascending to the throne in 1999. Reforms enacted by Hassan II fell into four broad categories: improved respect for human rights, a limited increase in the power of parliament, enhanced opportunities for political participation by parties and civil society, and some attempts to curb corruption. They included the multiparty parliamentary elections, formation of a human rights council, the Conseil Consultatif des Droits de l’Homme (CCDH), and later of the Ministry for Human Rights; the release of some political prisoners; the reform of laws on preventive detention and public demonstrations; the ratification of major international human rights conventions; and the formation of a special committee to investigate forced disappearances. Constitutional amendments in 1992 and 1996 turned parliament into a bicameral body, with a lower chamber elected entirely by universal suffrage (whereas only two-thirds of the old unicameral body had been directly
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elected), and broadened the scope of parliament’s competence to include approving the budget and questioning ministers. Of greatest political significance was King Hassan’s decision to reach out to political parties and to bring formerly hostile organizations into government. He involved all parties more directly in the discussion of a new electoral law and in other decisions affecting the conduct of elections. He allowed an Islamist organization, Al Islah wal Tajdid (Reform and Renewal) which later formed the Parti de la Justice et Dévelopement [PJD], to participate in the 1997 elections. The Parliamentary elections, at least since 2002, has been relatively free and fair.

The democratic initiatives in these North African nations that began in mid 1980s continued to expand the sphere of political pluralism by relaxing media restrictions, legalizing new political parties, tolerating dissent in limited sense, respecting a broader view of human rights, allowing many human rights and civil organizations to proliferate in large numbers and institutionalizing the process of multi-party elections till mid 1990s when the regimes in these countries decided to reverse the process of liberalization by curtailing civil and political rights of the citizens in the name of thwarting the threat of ‘terrorism’ (read Islamic opposition). The international context following the 9/11 incident further provided an opportunity to these regimes in North Africa to conscript the political space in the name of national security and fighting terrorism.

Conclusion

To conclude, empirical evidence suggests a link between mass agitation and political reforms in many polities. This is also confirmed by our examination of the role of bread riots in subsequent democratic openings in the Maghrib nations of the Arab world. However one should not mistake the real motives and motivations of authoritarian liberalizing regimes: political reforms following mass riots are often carried out with the intention of manipulating the public and defusing serious crises of legitimacy and

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challenges to the ruler’s hold on power. The superficiality of Arab political reforms attest to this: governments’ accountability and respect for the social and economic rights of individuals are not demands that the ruling elites are eager to grant. The breakdown of democratization in Algeria (1992) and other setbacks to the course of political liberalization as evident from Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia in 1990s highlight the fragility ad uncertainty of Arab political reforms. However, notwithstanding the superficiality of political reforms and regressive and re-tractive setbacks in Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco there is a reformist momentum that hinders return to single-party or single- man rule in many key “democratizing” countries. The contraction and expansion of democratic rights has been a part of process of a society/ nation undergoing the democratic transition. This is also being reflected in the case of Arab countries including North Africa. The threat of domestic political violence or its eruption has kept the democratic experiment alive in many Arab countries, particularly in North African countries; electoral and party politics have been sustained there for almost 25 years. Even the abortion of the democratic experiment in Algeria has not terminated the democratic momentum (eg. the parliamentary elections in 1997). Islamists across this region and other parts of the Muslim world continue to fight the authoritarian regimes by contrasting the construction of Islamic state as a form of democratic governance vis-a vis the existing un-Islamic authoritarian regimes. Such protests provide rulers with the opportunities to bolster their own legitimacy by looking into society’s demands and by reasserting the Islamic principles of good government on the basis of justice. These protests serve as form of pressure from below which often succeed in bringing change from above. It would not be an exaggeration to conclude that today in all Arab countries including Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Morrocco, despite their general authoritarianism, there is a significant margin of freedoms for civil society, which enables it to develop and thus increasingly be able to impact state policy and force greater openings of the system.

End Notes

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Source: http://www.muslimsocieties.org
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5 Ibid.


8 Ibid.


12 Ibid, 126.

13 Ibid, 127.

14 Ibid.


16 Ibid, 78

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Source: http://www.muslimsocieties.org
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xx Mark. N. Cooper, The Transformation of Egypt, London and Canberra (Croom Helm, 1982) p. 239.

xxi Seddon, opcit, pp 119-124.


xxiv Fred Halliday, “Tunisia’a Uncertain Future”, MERIP, no.163 (March- April), 1990, p.25

xxv Susan Waltz, Human Rights and Reforms (Berkely and University of Los Angles: California Press, 1995), pp. 175-176


xxviii Waltz, opcit, p, 186-187

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Source: http://www.muslimsocieties.org