



Billingsley Anthony. *Political Succession in the Arab World: Constitutions, Family Loyalties and Islam.* London: Routledge, 2010. 264 S. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-49536-3.

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A. Billingsley: Political Succession in the Arab World

The debate on political succession in the Arab World is a central feature of contemporary politics in the region. There is circumstantial evidence in several republics that dynastic succession is either in progress (for example Egypt) or has already taken place in the past (for example Syria). Yet, the question remains how plausible such a succession in various countries is and which historical roots and political variables must be taken into account when discussing the issue of 'dynastic republicanism' or dynastic modes in the region's monarchies.

Anthony Billingsley's book 'Political Succession in the Arab World' follows other publications on this topic. Such as Hartmut Fähndrich (ed.), *Vererbte Macht: Monarchien und Dynastien in der arabischen Welt*, Frankfurt am Main 2005; or Larbi Sadiki, *Wither Arab 'Republicanism'?* The Rise of Family Rule and the 'End of Democratization' in Egypt, Libya and Yemen, in: *Mediterranean Politics*, 15,1 (2010). Constitutions, family loyalties and Islam are at the centre of his analysis, which develops an overall model of political succession in the Arab World. Prior to Billingsley's work as lecturer at the University of New South Wales in Australia, he spent many years in various diplomatic and intelligence services. His hypothesis points at the central role played by tribal codes of loyalty and respect for those in authority. Thus, following Billingsley, traditional modes of governance derived from history and the legacy of tribalism outweigh security institutions and political repression in determining political succession of incumbent regimes. Based on some introductory remarks on the topic, the author presents his analysis with a theoretical framing

(with reference to Max Weber in particular) on tribalism, Islam, leadership, and legitimacy in order to describe what he calls the Arab World's 'political tradition of succession' (pp. 10-21). Eventually an appendix, including among others a 'power map' for Saudi Arabia and a memo of late Jordan's King Hussein to his brother and presumed Crown Prince Hassan, vividly supports some of his arguments in the respective chapters. Nonetheless, the overall outline of Billingsley's work remains inconsistent with hardly any tangible 'red thread'.

According to Anthony Billingsley, a distinctive 'political tradition of succession' is a central feature of the Arab World's 'unique political system' (p. 1). This assumption of an Arab exceptionalism is the most questionable aspect of this volume. Billingsley's profound analysis is definitely applicable to the Gulf monarchies. Tribal modes of governance, family rule derived from tradition, patrimonial inclusion of tribes and families dominate political decision-making in these states and are central for the question of political succession. Yet, in Arab republics, where we have been recently witnessing 'dynastic successions' (father-to-son) or preparations for the latter (for example Egypt and Yemen), it remains to be seen whether this was the rule or rather the exception. Discussing 'dynastic succession' in Arab republics should therefore include an analysis of the various power constellations (for example elite change) on the domestic level rather than confining itself to referring to the alleged 'political tradition of succession' in the Arab World (pp. 84ff.). Egypt offers a good example: 81-year-old President Mubarak is trying to introduce his second son

Gamal as his most likely successor. But does this really represent a unique feature of the Arab World or is it rather a common feature across the globe according to the circumstances?

Some incorrect facts and disputable categorizations that arise from cursory definitions of key terms such as tribalism, patrimonialism, and democracy (pp. 6-7) or from a fragmentary illustration of key events further diminish the value of his analysis. The author argues, for instance, that there are no Islamic republics in the Arab World (p. 19) which is definitely wrong for the case of Mauritania (official denomination: al-Jumhuriyya al-Islamiyya al-Muritaniyya). Similarly, he categorizes the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as a republic, which is again incorrect, as the UAE are a federation of seven autonomous emirates (p. 108). In addition to those minor inconsistencies, the author's in-depth analysis of political succession in case studies, such as Egypt, is flawed by a cursory narrative and subsequent analysis of the events that finally leads to wrong conclusions (pp. 160ff.). For example he claims without giving any single reference: 'Many of the candidates who had been associated with Gamal's [Mubarak, T.D.] political progress failed to be elected or lost their seats. If his claim to the presidency is to be built on a solid parliamentary base, he may have to wait for another general election.' (p. 162) Here, Billingsley should have included more empirical data in order to support this quite far reaching argument. In my own research, I come to a rather different conclusion: Thomas Demmelhuber, 'Egypt's Moment of Reform and its Reform Actors. The Variety-Capability Gap', in: *Democratization*, 16,1 (2009), pp. 119-136. The same applies to the following statement: 'Hosni Mubarak has worked hard for some years to establish links with

the business community in Egypt and business leaders have been introduced into the regime's elite structure.' (p. 163) In fact it was the 'infitah' policy, introduced by Mubarak's predecessor Anwar as-Sadat in the mid-1970s, which opened the economy for private entrepreneurs. This took place under the condition that any successful business enterprise needed the political backing of the regime. Through this process, Egypt's business elite gained strength, emancipated itself from the regime and, eventually, did not need an 'invitation' from President Mubarak. De facto, it had already become a part of the ruling elite by its own right.

As Billingsley elaborates in the introduction, his work is based on numerous interviews conducted during his stays in the region, while he was working for various diplomatic and intelligence services. Apart from that, he relies heavily on translated sources that are highly disputed with regard to their (in-)partiality (MEMRI – Middle East Media Research Institute). For a critical assessment of MEMRI's stance, see Brian Whitaker, 'Arabic under Fire', in: *The Guardian*, 15 May 2007. The consistent use of MEMRI sources (even for introductory citation, p. 10) does not give the impression that Billingsley has any doubts about the quality of these translations or has checked their accuracy.

In conclusion, Billingsley's book is an ambitious attempt to theorize the process of 'political succession' that is currently taking place in the Arab World. His analytical frame and his conclusions are noteworthy and a valuable contribution, particularly with regard to the Gulf monarchies. However, his attempt to include the current struggles over succession in the Arab republics into his analytical framework is much less convincing.

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