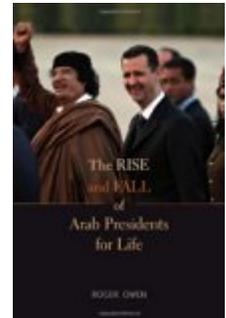


**Roger Owen.** *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012. xi + 248 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-06583-3.



**Reviewed by** Edward Webb

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**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

A distinguished historian of the modern Middle East and North Africa, Roger Owen has written a succinct account of a phenomenon that is not unique to the region, but has been strikingly widespread there: presidents for life, many with hereditary ambitions. The book was apparently completed in early 2011, allowing Owen to briefly consider the downfall of two such presidents--Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt--and discuss the prospects of others whose fates at that time were uncertain, including Muammar Al-Qaddafi of Libya and Bashar al-Assad of Syria. But the fall of presidents forms a relatively brief third act in a story mainly concerned with, first, how regimes of this kind arose in so many postcolonial states of the region and second, how they evolved to become increasingly monarchical, including as regards the issue of succession. The whole forms "a story in three parts" that moves along at a brisk clip, straddling the disciplines of modern history and political science without becoming mired in the jargon of either field (p. 192).

The three-part story shapes the book as follows: after a brief introduction, the first two chapters describe the emergence of the presidential security state in the postcolonial republics of the region, and the third chapter presents an invaluable anatomy of the particular institutions comprising the "Arab security state" (p. 37), including the presidency itself, the army and security services, cronies and other rent-seekers, and constitutions. Owen quite rightly emphasizes the importance of fostering economic development as a major legitimation strategy and, of course, Achilles heel of the regimes, returning to this all too briefly in the conclusion. Chapters 4-7 discuss the trajectories of specific states of the region. Chapter 8 addresses the specific problem and politics of succession, and chapter 9 considers exceptionalism. Chapter 10 presents a preliminary discussion of the "sudden fall" of the system in many parts of the region, in "an almost complete rejection of this form of semimonarchical government by many, or most, of their subject populations no longer able to stomach either the personal sense of humilia-

tion this method of rule involved or the way in which it alienated them from their fellow citizens," followed by a brief conclusion (p. 192).

The main arguments are that certain common features of the political systems of many of the republics of the region are not the result of any cultural exceptionalism or individual idiosyncrasies of a generation of rulers, but rather of quite comprehensible historical factors and processes. Those features include a near-obsessive concern with sovereignty; a disdain for electoral democracy; and the construction of large security apparatuses which replace legitimacy with a sense of the inevitability of the continuation of existing strong, personalist presidential rule. That these features appeared in states all around the region, despite their considerable differences from each other in resource endowments, specific colonial histories, and other factors, Owen attributes largely to an "Arab demonstration effect" (p. 153): presidents for life learned from one another how to hold on to power, both through observation and consultation. Owen sees evidence for such an effect in the similarity of certain techniques of regime maintenance deployed across the region. For example, he argues, the "fact that similar practices--the use of a National Pact and an election law to define 'legitimate' opposition, as well as decisions as to roughly how many opposition candidates might be allowed to 'win'--were to be found in Egypt, Jordan, and later, Morocco is testimony not just to an Arab demonstration effect but also to the perceived utility of practices that combined regime security with an opportunity to scare local populations with the threat of what might happen if Islamic parties were allowed to contest every seat" (p. 76).

The inclusion of monarchies in that list alerts us that Owen detects some important commonalities in strategies and practices between some of the non-republican authoritarian regimes and their presidential neighbors, and he devotes chapter 7 to Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain, and Oman. He

concludes that "Kings rule like presidents" in most practical respects, with the significant difference of possessing a "different authority" and "the quality of being slightly above the fray" as well as following the principle of hereditary succession (pp. 137, 138, 138). That discussion sets up an analysis in chapter 8 of the emergence of the peculiar phenomenon of the hereditary republic, whereby the establishment of strong presidential rule, consolidated in a small inner circle and maintained by minimal delegation, led to concerns about succession and a preference for grooming close family members for power. Here he develops two arguments, discussing mainly the actual succession of Bashar Al-Assad in Syria and the expected, but aborted, succession of Gamal Mubarak in Egypt, although he also considers four other republics. The first argument is that "the expectation of a family succession affected every part of the political process"; the second is that, despite the intention of producing security and predictability for elites, family succession "if mishandled or if it was simply allowed to go on too long, ... promot[ed] the opposite: an atmosphere of anxiety and uncertainty exacerbated by increasing popular hostility to the ruling family itself" (p. 139). Egypt and Tunisia both provide ample evidence of the latter effect. The succession in Syria both provided a template for hereditary republican succession and provided opponents with "an alarming list of the negative costs involved in family succession," including corruption in particular (p. 143).

Apart from the peculiarity of the hereditary republican form, to the extent that Owen finds exceptionalism in the region, it is in the issue of strategic rent: a particular authoritarian political structure that was *not* unique to the region--one-party postcolonial states, planned development, wealth redistribution--was made exceptionally robust and sustainable due to "the degree to which its regimes were able to obtain significant resources, directly or indirectly, from oil and Cold War aid" (p. 18). Due to the strategic importance

of the region, presidential regimes were able to extract rents from superpower sponsors and even from the conservative monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia. Despite ideological differences, the Saudi royals preferred to deal with the known quantity and presumed stability of established de facto presidents-for-life than with uncertain change, finding common cause with them in issues such as promoting "moderate" Islam against Islamist radicalism: hence a "very real sense of distress when some of these old friends like Ben Ali and Mubarak were overthrown" (p. 169).

This is a study of comparative political development over the course of a half-century or more. It is necessarily broad, relying on secondary sources. Owen draws on the work of political scientists, political psychologists, historians, and other observers of the region, as well as personal communications and his own observations as a student of the region's politics for several decades. The subject matter as well as the scope resist archival or other modes of more detailed inquiry, and at several points he concedes that elements of the account can only be based upon speculation or thought experiments. An example is Owen's analysis, in the conclusion, of the "mirror state" surrounding Qaddafi. While there is much strong, well-supported argument throughout the book on the institutional structures common across the region's republics, Owen notes that "the particular contribution of each president's own personality, and of the way this helped to shape the final outcome, can only be guessed at, given the almost complete lack of the necessary information on which such an exercise in biography must be based" (p. 194). But he spends a few pages making the attempt anyway, applying political-psychological arguments developed by Jerrold M. Post and the observations of journalists to discuss Qaddafi and his enablers, as a route to considering "each president's desire to control his own political environment combined with his own lack of personal boundaries" (p. 199). This section is reasonably plausible, but not terribly satisfying: we can hope

for better evidence to emerge in time, although probably not from the fallen leaders themselves--Owen cites the interviews in Riccardo Orizio's fascinating *Talk of the Devil: Encounters with Seven Dictators* (2004) to suggest that we will not hear much self-recrimination from the Ben Alis and Mubaraks.

I hope we will see before too long a revised and updated version--perhaps in paperback, with students in mind. There are some minor oddities and errors that could usefully be corrected for any future editions, including a reference to "Radio Al Jazeera" (p. 176) and different spellings of Shibley Telhami's name in notes appearing on pages 206 and 208. More substantively, I hope that Professor Owen will update the text to reflect on the different fates of the regimes he analyzes here. Neither the brutal end of Qaddafi nor the stubborn resilience of the Assad regime undermine the portrait offered here significantly: but his analysis of events since early 2011 would enhance chapter 10, "The Sudden Fall," and the conclusion. Events in Tunisia seem to bear out his cautious optimism about that country's prospects (pp. 189-90), while the torments of Egypt as the "deep state" (p. 189) reasserts itself in the face of divided civil society appear to confirm "that presidential monarchy is an easier concept to understand and to practice than popular republicanism" (p. 183). As McClatchy newspapers reported from Cairo on the second anniversary of the bloody clashes in Mohammed Mahmoud St, the "ability of those who call for change to spell out only what they don't want is one reason many Egyptians have turned to the military, the only institution that has a history bringing stability, albeit with brute force." [1] Despite this regression in Egypt and uncertainty elsewhere, Owen's main conclusion about the events across the region beginning in late 2010 seems broadly right. Even if Assad somehow survives Syria's civil war atop a functioning state, the regional picture has shifted so that "the era of multiple monarchical presi-

dents for life" has probably come to an end (p. 191).

This would be a useful text for undergraduate classes on the postcolonial history of the region, on comparative politics of the region, or specifically on authoritarian regimes, whether in the region or in broader comparative context. It is also suitable for a more general readership: Professor Owen has produced a very readable political history of an important phenomenon.

#### Note

[1]. Nancy A. Youssef and Amina Ismail, "Demonstration highlights how Egypt has changed," McClatchy, November 19, 2013, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2013/11/19/209081/demonstration-highlights-how-egypt.html>.

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