Preserving Non-Democracies: Leaders and State Institutions in the Middle East

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After nearly two decades of studying the causes, processes and outcomes of transitions to democracy, scholars in recent years have again shown a growing interest in the study of the ways and means through which non-democracies maintain themselves in power. Dictators and dictatorship, of course, seldom lack creativity when it comes to staying power, and when creativity fails there is always brute force. Despite this recent proliferation of scholarship on the durability of dictatorships, insufficient attention has been paid to the dictators' manipulation of institutions as a way to deepen and solidify their hold on power.

This article examines the relationship between state leaders and state institutions, focusing on the reasons for and the ways through which institutional change is used as a means to consolidate political power. Most explanations of the perseverance of authoritarianism point to the political consequences of rentierism, or the strength of the ruling coalition in relation to potential political opponents, or the 'robustness of the coercive apparatus' of the state. This article posits an additional causal factor: dictators may inherit or create institutions, but then they actively guard against the institutions' independence. When and if these institutions demonstrate too much independence, or exhibit signs that they might actually become platforms for political opposition, then they are simply closed or disbanded by leaders. Especially in the Middle East, where political leaders have been able to maintain the upper hand in relation to institutions through control over the accrual and distribution of rent revenues, institutional tinkering, or wholesale institutional change, is often used to pre-empt the potential emergence of centres of political opposition. Deliberate institutional change is often used as a source of authoritarian sustenance.

Using three case studies in the Middle East – Egypt, Kuwait, and Iran – the article argues that choices and bargains made early on by state leaders are critical determinants of the institutional make-up and features of the state. As time goes by and as institutions age, they tend to become more subject to path dependence, thus limiting the scope of decisions open to state actors. Things change, however, if and when state leaders determine that major institutional adjustments are needed in order for them to stay in power, at which time decisions outside of established institutional frameworks are taken in order to safeguard dictatorial prerogatives. In other words, dictators often resort to both 'rational choice' and 'path dependence' in order to maintain themselves in power.
The central thesis of this article is that state leaders often create specific institutions that are meant to enhance their powers and their political longevity. A proliferation of new state institutions often occurs during periods of political institutionalization, when the new leaders of a state seek to modify its institutions, or set out to create new ones, in ways that are compatible with their vision and their needs and capabilities. Once in place and operational, however, state institutions constrain the extent to which leaders can exercise free will on their own accord, their actions having to take place within established institutional frameworks. Nevertheless, in non-democracies – which include all of the three Middle Eastern cases under discussion here – state institutions remain malleable in relation to the wishes of key state leaders, with the latter maintaining, or seeking to maintain, independence from and superiority over the former.

Put differently, during the initial period of political institutionalization, state leaders are able to choose from a wider menu of institutional choices that are available to them than is the case as time goes by. In non-democracies, state leaders continue to retain the upper hand, often treating state institutions as appendages that are simply meant to enhance their hold on power. State institutions are established with an original blueprint in mind. If and when they veer off their intended course or exhibit too much autonomy, leaders step back in order to rectify what they perceive to be institutional misdirection.

This hypothesis can be successfully tested against the workings of three contemporary states in the Middle East – namely the Kuwaiti, the Egyptian and the Iranian states – during periods that saw a proliferation of new state institutions, from the late 1950s to the 1980s in Kuwait, between 1952 and 1970 in Egypt, and from 1979 to 1989 in Iran. At different periods in the establishment and evolution of each of these states, one or more specific determinants have shaped the nature and the processes of political institutionalization and consolidation. At the beginning, when two of the states were initially being reconstituted (Egypt in 1952 and Iran in 1979), political leaders established new institutions through creative and deliberate political crafting with little or no regard to pre-existing institutional arrangements. This process of political institutionalization was a product of rational and intentional choices, the usage of ideological blueprints for institutional design purposes, the articulation of constitutional arrangements, bargains and compromises, and, eventually, the actual construction and establishment of a vast majority of the key institutions of the state.

Steadily, state institutions developed internal procedures and incentives and began to be guided by the logic of ‘increasing returns’. As state institutions begin to regularize their operations, the emerging institutional framework and the resultant political consolidation tend to limit the range of options open to existing or aspiring political actors. With time, existing state institutions reproduce themselves in different guises that are often dictated by the logic of survival strategies. Unless prompted to do so by a need for corrective action, or by exogenous shocks of one sort or another, state actors tend to allow path dependence to continue on its course, allowing state institutions to deepen and to solidify their roots in relation to social actors and other organizations as much as possible.

Institutional deadlocks and actual or perceived shocks, however, can prompt state leaders into action, forcing them to assume more proactive postures in relation to the
institutional make-up, roles and efficacy of the state. This is especially the case with non-democratic states, whose continued survival depends on frequent adjustments to the rules of the game in relation to the social actors they seek to keep compliant or the political competitors they wish to pacify. State leaders often keep a watchful eye over the pattern and direction of institutional change, allowing and even enabling state institutions to reproduce themselves, through layering or changes initiated from within the institutions themselves, so long as these institutional changes are in a direction that is consistent with the leaders’ broader agendas and vision. If at some point state leaders assume that the emerging institutional arrangements of the state are moving in a counterproductive direction, or that the state itself must respond to actual or perceived threats, they begin to initiate what they perceive to be corrective actions. Reinvigorated agency – the deliberate efforts of leaders and other actors within the state – often transpires within established and by now entrenched institutional patterns, thus often resulting in measured institutional tinkering rather than wholesale replacement. If successful, the outcome is the prolonging of authoritarian rule.

There are two general explanations for the continued durability of authoritarian political systems in an age of democracy. Broadly, these studies focus either on the political consequences of rentierism, or on the institutional cohesion and strength of ruling elites in comparison to their opponents.\(^6\) Since an overwhelming majority of authoritarian hold-outs today are in the Middle East, most of these studies focus on the region in general or on individual case studies in particular.

Discussions of the effects of rent income on the perseverance of authoritarian systems have long been a feature of case studies involving the Middle East. States that are able to ‘buy consensus by distributing goods, services and income in exchange for little or nothing’, the rentier argument goes, have no incentive to become democratic.\(^7\) They may experience power struggles or factionalism, but they are unlikely to experience widespread, popular demands for democratization.\(^8\) Michael Ross has discerned three complementary causal mechanisms that link rent income to resilient authoritarianism.\(^9\) They include what he labels ‘the rentier effect’, resulting from an absence of social pressures for greater accountability; ‘the repression effect’, arising from the state’s ready access to sources of repression and its ability to repress opponents; and ‘the modernization effect’, whereby easy wealth keeps the public demobilized and devoid of demands for political participation.

More recent studies have focused on the institutional dynamics that keep authoritarian political structures intact. Most of these analyses examine how the behaviour of ruling elites enhances their cohesiveness, strengthens their hold on instruments of power, and fragments or incapacitates emerging or existing counter-elites. For Jason Brownlee, ‘the capacity of rulers to repress their opponents through unrestrained violence’ is key to their longevity.\(^10\) This ability is particularly enhanced when there are few or no external constraints and international pressures on the ruler.\(^11\) As important, he maintained a few years later, is the ability of the ruling elite to maintain its cohesion and to organize itself into a ruling political party.\(^12\) Since parties have the effect of ‘sustaining coalitions of seemingly disparate elites’, their continued institutional strength and organizational viability is central to an
authoritarian elite’s staying power. Benjamin Smith also credits singly party rule for the persistence of authoritarianism, arguing that ‘elites who face and survive the most strenuous fiscal and political crises early on are likely to do so because they have invested heavily in institution and coalition building.’ They thus build robust party institutions which rest on ruling coalitions that can help them survive later crises. In other cases, if elites have the widest array of options early on, the single parties they establish become rent-seeking arenas whose survival depends on continued access to patronage rents.

Similarly, in looking at Iran in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Arang Keshavasian points to the importance of elite cohesion and opposition incapacity as sources of authoritarian sustenance, or, inversely, elite division and conflict and oppositional organizational power as prerequisites for democratic transitions. Ellen Lust-Okar focuses on the consequences of ‘structures of contestation’, maintaining that partial inclusion of opponents in the political process, usually through electoral politics, often has the effect of creating divisions among opponents, increasing the number of stakeholders in the system, and ultimately resulting in its maintenance. Incumbents often have the opportunity and the capacity to ‘structure the relations between competing opposition groups’ and with themselves. At the same time, incumbents ‘actively manipulate the development and strength of opposition groups’, helping strengthen some while harshly repressing others, ‘thereby affecting when opposition groups will make sustained demands for political change and when they will not’. Gandhi and Przeworski agree, pointing to autocrats’ incorporation of potential opposition forces in partisan legislatures as a means of investing opponents with a stake in the rulers’ survival.

Both rentier and institutionalist arguments give us insight into various aspects of and reasons for the durability of authoritarian systems. In fact, some of the more successful explanations of authoritarian durability pay attention to the ways in which rentier arrangements facilitate the emergence of institutional characteristics that undermine pressures for liberalization and are ultimately inimical to democratic transitions. Nevertheless, both approaches tend to overlook the incumbent elite’s nuanced and context-specific relationship with the very institutions they initially establish for the specific purpose of deepening their hold on power. Regardless of whether or not rent-seeking behaviour by the state reduces the potential for political opposition, authoritarian leaders will not give up power so long as the administrative and coercive institutions on which they rely remain intact and are not abandoned in large numbers by those who staff them. At the same time, authoritarian incumbents are constantly in search of ways to safeguard their rule from existing or potential opponents, a part of which entails careful attention to the institutional make-up and trajectory of the state. In the process, they create, expand or contract, change, or altogether disband institutions of the state, some of which become significantly more difficult to change after they are initially formed. This deliberate institutional meddling, sometimes more overt and blatant than at other times, is one of the primary causes for keeping authoritarian regimes intact.

As the three cases discussed below demonstrate, at any given point in the life of states, both the choices of state leaders and endogenous developments within
institutions are responsible for changes to state institutions. At some points in the life of state institutions, agency and deliberate choices are more determinative of the degree and direction of change, while at other points the primary cause is path dependence. When institutional formation is at embryonic stages and state institutions have yet to become settled, as is the case during earlier periods of political institutionalization, the rational choices of state leaders, coupled with pure power politics, determine the overall configuration of state institutions and the direction of their change. Once these same institutions have had time to settle and have resumed routine operations, they develop an internal logic driven by increasing returns, which in turn motivates them to reproduce in ways that are familiar and are perceived to entail the least amount of risk.

If left on their own, state institutions provide blueprints and an increasingly narrow range of options for further institutional production and reproduction. Building on the arguments of Archer, Greener maintains that once institutions are in place, path dependence is ‘likely to emerge where both structural and cultural vested interest groups (become) dependent upon one another to hold power’. After the period of production, he writes, ‘a period of reproduction’ ensues in which increasingly entrenched institutions and ideas ‘lock out’ other, competing ones and ‘the opportunity cost for challenging the system’ steadily rises. Insofar as the consolidation of formal state institutions is concerned, this process of steady institutional reproduction, often through layering, frequently occurs during processes of political consolidation. The resulting set of state institutions and their arrangements continue operating unless and until they outlive their utility or prove to be dysfunctional, or worse yet face some type of crisis from within or from the outside. Such circumstances often prompt state actors to initiate defensive or corrective measures.

This is particularly the case in ‘sultanistic’ and other personalistic regimes, in which state leaders create institutions for the specific purpose of maintaining themselves in power, when leaders remain paramount and state institutions act as power auxiliaries. So long as state institutions do the job they were designed for – i.e. keeping the leaders’ powers intact and perpetuating them – they are left alone and, in fact, operate more or less based on their own inertia. If they outlive their utility, or worse yet become a source of liability, or perhaps become a little too independent and a potential source of competition to the leader, then they have to contend with the deliberate, calculated decisions of the state’s leaders.

Path dependence tends to continue when political consolidation sets in, unless and until state leaders perceive that deliberate institutional re-engineering is needed in order to resolve unintended consequences resulting from institutional deadlock or inefficiency, or to address some impending or unfolding crisis. In these instances, state leaders once again step in and try to come up with creative solutions that will remedy the situation and will enhance their chances of political endurance. Under such circumstances, agency and deliberate crafting become the norm again. But this time state leaders are not creating institutions from scratch and are not working with a blank canvas. For the most part, they make adjustments and modifications to the existing institutions of the state and the roles they play – or to existing institutional arrangements – instead of engaging in the wholesale creation of new institutions. Their decisions, in other words, are
somewhat constrained this time as compared to their first attempt at institution-building. As North argues, if and when institutional change becomes necessary, ‘secondary institutional arrangements will be innovated at a much lower cost than changing the fundamental institutional arrangements’ of the system. Nevertheless, if the efforts of state leaders are successful, once the institutional adjustments are over, old patterns of path dependence tend to return.

Once institutions are already in place, processes of institutional change tend to occur through ‘increasing returns’ and ‘institutional layering’. In relatively more stable and developed polities, institutional adaptations and renegotiations tend to be more subtle, gradual, and often evolutionary. As Cortell and Peterson have demonstrated, in decentralized, democratic polities, the existence of multiple ‘veto points or authoritative actors’ throughout the system tends to make institutional change less abrupt and more incremental.

There are instances, however, found especially in the developing world and in relatively underdeveloped and unstable polities, where, for reasons endogenous or exogenous to the system, state institutions suffer complete breakdowns, resulting in failed states of one form or another (Lebanon from 1975 to 1990, and Somalia from 1991 until now). More common than failed states are centralized polities in which institutional change tends to be deliberate, sudden and abrupt. In many such political systems, in fact, the emergence of institutional incoherence and dysfunctionality, or internal or exogenous shocks, necessitate institutional re-engineering and crafting, thus ushering in important changes to existing patterns of institutional conduct and arrangement. Especially in the developing world, not all institutional change is layered or even a product of conversion. Sometimes state leaders are prompted into action by massive, sudden and fundamental shocks to the system, like attempted coups or popular demands for change. More often, however, they are simply motivated by a desire to enhance the efficacy of the state institutions through which they rule, or, alternatively, to ensure that institutional change and evolution does not slip from under their control. At any rate, agency and deliberate actions play a determining role here in influencing the make-up, arrangement and roles of state institutions.

The cases chosen here – Nasserist Egypt, Khomeini’s Iran, and monarchical Kuwait – represent prototypical examples of non-democratic states found in the Middle East. There are various ways of dividing Middle East states into typologies. Richards and Waterbury use an economics matrix, dividing the region’s states into ‘socialist republics’, ‘liberal monarchies’, and existing or aspiring democracies. Nazih Ayubi offers a more streamlined typology based on regime functions and orientations, dividing the Arab states of the region into radical, populist republics on the one hand and conservative monarchies on the other. All three authors agree, however, that the Egyptian state under Nasser relied greatly on the pacification and repression of its opponents through increasingly authoritarian means in order to stay in power. As such, it typified many of the populist-cum-authoritarian regimes that came to power in the region in later decades (in Algeria, Tunisia, Syria, Iraq, and Iran under the Shah). Although the Nasserist state that emerged out of the 1952 coup featured strong elements of populism, it was ultimately far more repressive and exclusionary than populist.
In contrast, Khomeini’s Iran was populist *par excellence*, with a charismatic leader, a mass-based revolution, and a bloody war forming the backdrop of the state seeking to re-define and re-connect itself with society. The so-called ‘first republic’ that took root in Iran following the 1979 revolution, while highly repressive, was far more populist in character and make-up than exclusionary. Ayatollah Khomeini’s charisma remained compelling and powerful throughout his life, and the war with Iraq kept nationalist fervour and mass mobilization at unprecedented levels. The system remained, on balance, more inclusionary than exclusionary.\(^{35}\)

Kuwait, for its part, represents the dwindling but still numerous monarchies that are found throughout the Middle East. Though somewhat unique due to the vibrancy of its parliamentary politics, Kuwait, as an example of an ‘oil monarchy’,\(^{36}\) was chosen because its size, its history and the make-up of its state institutions place it somewhere midway between the micro-states of Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE on one side, and the older and more populous monarchies of Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Oman on the other.

Each of these three cases is examined in what may be considered as ‘critical junctures’ in its recent political history, namely the tenures in office of Gamal Abdel Nasser and Ayatollah Khomeini in Egypt and Iran respectively, which witnessed the construction of new state apparatuses and the redirection of pre-existing ones, and, in Kuwait, the rise and fall of the parliament from the 1960s through the 1980s.\(^{37}\) In each case, state leaders deliberately engaged in the establishment of state institutions in order to strengthen their own hold on power. Soon, however, they found it necessary to make modifications and adjustments to the very institutions and/or to the institutional arrangements that underlay their operations.

Significantly, all three of the states discussed here were engaged in war preparation or war-making during the periods that are considered below (Egypt in 1967, Iran from 1980 to 1988, and Kuwait in 1991). Unlike the situation in Western Europe, where war-making led to the development of relatively strong states, wars in the contemporary Middle East have been shown to result in net reductions in the powers of the state.\(^{38}\) Specifically, wars in the Middle East have tended to deepen the states’ fiscal crises, lessen their extractive powers, and, perhaps most alarmingly, seriously cut into their popular legitimacy. It is unclear whether war-induced reductions in state power have helped facilitate greater opportunities for state leaders to assert themselves politically, or have spurred them to act more decisively out of desperation. Whatever the cause, the outcomes have been the same: leaders have consistently maintained the upper hand in relation to state institutions, changing them if and when the need arises.

Kuwait has had a vibrant tradition of parliamentary politics ever since it became formally independent from Britain in 1961. Despite this vibrancy, the parliament has had at best a spotty record of legislative accomplishments and overall efficacy due largely to the machinations of the ruling Al-Sabah family. In fact, the fate and viability of the Kuwaiti parliament as an institution of the state perfectly demonstrates the oscillating impetus for change between paramount leaders on the one hand and dynamics endogenous to the institution itself on the other. Within the Kuwaiti political establishment, there are a number of historical, political and
structural factors that ensure the supremacy of the ruling family over the parliament, and indeed over the entire political system and the body politic. Nevertheless, since the country’s formal independence from Britain in 1961, the ruling family has had to contend with a parliament on the one hand, and has frequently had to curtail the parliament’s powers on the other, to the point of dissolving it for prolonged periods on two separate occasions. Ultimately, at each instance, the ruling emir has ensured that the royal court’s supremacy over the parliament remains intact.

In the late 1950s and the early 1960s, the emir, Shaikh Adballah al-Salim (r. 1961–65), was buoyed by massive demonstrations of loyalty by many Kuwaitis in the face of strong challenges by Nasserist Pan-Arabists to the Arab world’s more conservative rulers. The emir felt confident enough to allow the drafting of a constitution the following year and to convene a National Assembly in early 1963. Interestingly, in constructing the various organs of the new state, several pre-existing administrative departments were upgraded to full-fledged ministries (e.g. the departments of police and public security were amalgamated with the Ministry of the Interior). But there were no pre-existing institutional predecessors for the National Assembly, so it had to be created from scratch.

From the very beginning, the ruling family did not view the emergence of parliamentary politics as key to its legitimacy. Instead, the state has long relied on the provision of material goods, through the infusion of the oil wealth into the economy, as its primary means of legitimation. As such, the National Assembly was seen as a necessary irritant, an appendage that any modern state needs to have but one whose antics the Kuwaiti state hardly needs or can afford to handle. As Jacqueline Ismael observes,

The National Assembly was envisioned as a rubber stamp for policies set forth by the ruling class as embodied in the executive. However, the National Assembly emerged with a stronger spirit of independence than its architects envisioned. Although political parties were prohibited, a strong opposition bloc developed almost immediately.

In fact, contrary to the ruling family’s expectations, in the elections of 1967, 1971 and 1975, the opposition bloc steadily emerged as stronger than expected. Emboldened by the initial successes of the Lebanese left in the aftermath of Lebanon’s 1975 civil war, the National Assembly sought to pass a law strengthening the role of the judiciary vis-à-vis the royal family. The emir, Sabah Al-Salim Al-Sabah (r. 1965–77), vetoed the bill. Although the parliament could not muster the two-thirds majority necessary to over-ride the veto, opposition members tried to find a way around it. Faced with such a possibility, the emir simply dissolved the parliament. The ruling family, and in particular the emir, once again became the fount of all political power. Having become increasingly independent through its own momentum, the institution of the National Assembly was simply terminated.

By the early 1980s, however, a new emir – Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah (r. 1977–2006) – decided that reviving the National Assembly would once again serve the interests of the ruling establishment. The Iranian revolution of 1978–79 had unleashed a wave of nationalist and Shi’a sectarian sentiments across the Persian Gulf region. Revolutionary Iran and ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ seemed ominous
threats to ruling establishments across the Middle East. And a bloody war between Iran and Iraq threatened to spill over into Kuwait and elsewhere. The emir called for elections to a new National Assembly in February 1981, though this time precautions were taken to ensure that pan-Arab nationalists and Shi'a opposition candidates were at a distinct disadvantage.

Despite the court's best efforts, the new parliament did not remain docile, and by 1986 it was dissolved once again, this time not to be revived until 1992, a year after the country's occupation by Iraq was over. With its image badly damaged and its legitimacy faltering because of its poor conduct during the Iraqi invasion and occupation, the ruling family found it necessary to revive the institution of the National Assembly once again. Concessions were also made to revive constitutional politics, though, again, parallel measures were instituted to ensure the ruling family's supremacy within the larger polity.

Despite such limitations, the National Assembly's powers were impressively demonstrated during the 'succession crisis' that followed Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's death in January 2006, when the body decided that the heir apparent was too ill and thus unfit to rule the country. In an unprecedented show of power, the parliament successfully initiated measures to depose the designated emir and to transfer power to another member of the Al-Sabah family. Left with few options, the new emir abdicated after only ten days in office, and a different Al-Sabah, Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, succeeded to the position of the emir. Not unexpectedly, however, so far there are no indications that the traditional imbalance of power between the ruling family and the National Assembly has in any way been altered to remedy the former's supremacy.

The fate of the Kuwaiti National Assembly is but one example of state leaders' manipulation of state institutions that could otherwise have threatened authoritarian rule had they been left on their own. Kuwait is, admittedly, a somewhat extreme example of a polity in which individual leaders exercise inordinate power over state institutions and procedures, to the point of often completely overshadowing them. Nevertheless, at least insofar as sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf and the many non-democracies of the larger Middle East are concerned, it typifies political systems in which state leaders frequently resort to institutional engineering and re-engineering in order to enhance their own powers and to fend off emerging threats. Such was also the case for Egypt of the 1950s and the 1960s, especially as Nasser set out to create a brand new power structure that befitted his grand ambitions.

The 18-year interval in Egyptian history in which Gamal Abdel Nasser was the country's paramount ruler, from 1952 to 1970, witnessed a series of important institutional changes. Nasser and his Free Officers came to power in a military coup in 1952 and immediately set out to eliminate existing state institutions and create new ones in their place. For the next two years, a whole new institutional set-up was established, and, more importantly, Nasser himself out-maneuvered and out-muscled his opponents and emerged as the paramount ruler of Egypt. Although political institutionalization continued after Nasser's ascension to the presidency in 1954, from that point on the new regime became increasingly more consolidated in...
its powers and more elaborate in its institutional make-up. Additional institutional appendages were added to the state and existing ones were transformed to enhance their efficacy and functions. In June 1967, however, the regime suffered a massive shock, when in a matter of a few hours its armed forces were crippled by Israel, which then went on to conquer a sizeable portion Egyptian territory over the course of the next few days. To salvage whatever power and prestige he still had, Nasser reasserted his personal authority, initiated a massive purge of the state and especially the armed forces, and reconfigured, as much as possible, some of the state’s key institutions. That he died less than three years later should not lessen the significance of his efforts near the end of his rule to once again restore his ‘Nasserist’ state to its glory days of the mid-to-late 1950s.

Immediately upon capturing state power in 1952, Nasser and the Free Officers initiated a series of quite significant and lasting institutional changes. Of these, three stand out. First, the monarchy was abolished, although the self-proclaimed revolutionaries did not initially know what to do with the monarch. Eventually, in June 1953, some 11 months after taking power, the revolutionaries declared a republic. Second, and more important, a Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) was set up and became the central decision-making body of the state. Third, concurrent with the establishment of the RCC, the central focus and function of the military was changed as it was increasingly drawn into the bureaucratic apparatus of the state and was put in charge of making and implementing public policy. At the same time, its primary mission of internal policing, which had been a relic of British rule, was shifted to make it a force for securing national defence and projecting power internationally.

Upon assuming power, the new elite found themselves confronted with two key tasks, one to build coalitions that provided key support to the new political order, and the other to politically neutralize those groups that could pose potential threats to the new order. The RCC became an important institutional device for both purposes. Through the RCC, large numbers of loyal officers were recruited and were placed at all levels of the bureaucracy, some as policy-makers and others as ‘Representatives of the RCC’, thus paving the way for ‘the creation of a new ruling class, a new power elite and political directorate’. This was followed by extensive purges within the armed forces and other institutions of the state of individuals suspected of ties or continued allegiance to the old order. Before long, a new era had dawned in Egyptian politics, not just in appearance and style, but, more importantly, in the make-up and purpose of its state institutions. In the words of P.J. Vatikiotis,

Very shortly after grabbing power [the RCC] managed to abolish several millennia-old institutions, exploit the fragmented civilian forces and dazzle the multitudes with their dramatic – even if some were practically meaningless – reform measures. The RCC clearly gained in strength while its adversaries weakened. Purges and exposes of corruption were good publicity and heralded a real clash between the saviours and the exploiters.

As the RCC was busy redesigning the institutional features of the state, there were significant developments taking place within the body itself. Through a steady process of purging and purification, Nasser gradually cast aside those RCC members
who stood in his path to personal power. Most notable was the chairman and president of the RCC, General Muhammad Naguib, who in 1954 was accused of plotting against Nasser and was placed under house-arrest. Naguib’s allies were also purged from the RCC and the army. Nasser himself assumed the office of the prime minister. A year earlier, in January 1953, all political parties were dissolved and a mass-based organization under the name Liberation Rally (Hay’at al-Tahrir) was inaugurated for purposes of mobilizing popular support for the regime. The Liberation Rally proved to be an important and useful institutional innovation, frequently called upon to demonstrate public support and enthusiasm for the RCC’s – and increasingly Nasser’s – initiatives. A three-year ‘transitional period’ was also declared in 1953, and the military was placed under even more direct control of the state.

Within a short few years, Nasser had clearly positioned himself as the paramount leader of the emerging state, designing and redesigning state institutions in order to secure his increasingly firm hold on power. This is best represented through his efforts to establish a party-like organization that would at once support his agendas, mobilize mass popular enthusiasm for his policies and initiatives, and co-opt or at least placate his opponents. The Liberation Rally was the first to go. Despite its early successes, Nasser soon grew disenchanted with it, and viewed it as inefficient, void of experienced leadership, and without a cohesive ideology. He dissolved the organization in 1956 and the following year created the National Union (al-Ittihad al-Qawmi) in its place. Soon, however, he came to view the new organization as similarly flawed in its structure and its ideological outlook.

Nasser was not too far off the mark; both the Liberation Rally and its successor organization, the National Union, turned into forums for personal squabbles and petty bickering soon after they were formed, and neither functioned as an effective organ for mass mobilization, ideological articulation, or any form of even controlled political participation. Partly because of the political inexperience of those who ran and staffed them, and partly because of Nasser’s incessant meddling, neither body was really given a chance to function as the mass mobilizing political party that it was intended to be. The Liberation Rally was a novel institutional creation, and the ideas behind it led to the subsequent creation of the National Union. But the same set of problems that had plagued the earlier organization soon found their way into the second one. Created in 1957, the National Union had also outlived its utility by 1961. Nasser dissolved it and in 1962 created yet another organization, this one called the Arab Socialist Union (ASU).

All three institutional experiments were meant to deepen and consolidate the regime’s hold on power. If the Liberation Rally was intended to facilitate the new state’s institutionalization, the National Union and the ASU were products of its move toward greater consolidation. Tellingly, however, the ASU, though it got off to a rocky start, became increasingly more powerful as a potential rival to Nasser, to the point that by the end of his rule he perceived it as a real threat. By the mid-to-late 1960s, ‘large pockets of illegitimate authority’ were cropping up both within the ASU and elsewhere in the state. In 1966, Nasser found it necessary to purge the party and to cut the membership of its executive committee from 14 to 7. Nevertheless, the ASU’s potential for challenging Nasser did not completely dissipate and was especially evident after the 1967 war. Soon after Nasser’s death in 1970, his successor, Anwar Sadat, dissolved the party.
There were equally significant institutional developments in relation to the executive arm of the state as well. The RCC was clearly a novel and innovative structural device designed to institutionalize the power of the state’s new leaders. 1956 marked the end of the ‘transition period’ that Naguib had promised three years earlier, and that year witnessed significant changes in the Egyptian state. Elections were held for the presidency and for a constitution; Nasser was elected to the office with 99.9 per cent of the votes cast, and the constitution was approved by a margin of 99.8 per cent.\(^58\) Having exhausted its utility – having helped forge new coalitions, purged opponents, articulated state policies and priorities, and catapulted Nasser to national prominence – the RCC, which up until then had acted as a central decision-making body, was dissolved, and all of its members except for one became civilians. Nasser used the opportunity to set aside even more of his potential opponents and to replace them with loyal allies. Now in full charge of the state, he was the paramount leader of Egypt.

Despite its dissolution in 1956, the RCC’s institutional significance cannot be overstated. Used with brilliant effectiveness to institutionalize the new state, the RCC became the primary conduit for recruiting and training the state’s key officials and functionaries, build coalitions with broad spectrums of Egyptian society, and eliminate existing or potential opponents. It also served as the nucleus of the emerging executive, and developments within it – perhaps the most significant of which were Nasser’s rise to prominence and Naguib’s elimination – shaped the character of the state long after the RCC itself was disbanded. The consolidation of the new regime under Nasser’s leadership was further complemented by the outcome of the 1956 Suez Canal crisis, from which Nasser appeared to his people to have emerged a heroic saviour,\(^59\) and by the union with Syria, an endeavour in which Nasser engaged reluctantly but one that was initially met with mass excitement on both sides of the United Arab Republic. Nasser’s own charisma and penchant for dramatic speeches did not hurt.

But the shock of the 1967 war was too great for even Nasser to handle without alarm. The regime’s predicament was made graver in February 1968, when massive demonstrations with an anti-government tone erupted in Cairo and elsewhere. The war and its aftermath also demonstrated the degree to which the regime and its guardians had become complacent and ineffective over time. It was time once again for Nasser to act and to do so decisively, if, that is, he still wanted to stay in power. And he did, first by dismissing his closest allies in command of the army, and then initiating a massive purge of the army’s rank-and-file, who up until then had been one of the regime’s key bases of support.\(^60\) More importantly, Nasser initiated far-reaching reforms to the composition and functions of the ASU. He also dissolved the sitting National Assembly and sponsored elections for a new one. The new Assembly’s powers, up until then largely superficial, were slightly enhanced. A new, permanent constitution was promised, and a popular referendum put the public’s stamp of approval on the reform plan. As it turned out, Nasser, suffering from ill health, died of a heart attack in 1970 before he had a chance to put his next plans into action.

The establishment, functions and occasional disbanding of various state institutions during Nasser’s presidency demonstrates the complex and on-going interaction between path dependence on the one hand and agency and rational
decision-making on the other. Nasser and his fellow Free Officers, who were themselves new to the game of politics, set out to create an entirely new set of state institutions, and in so doing started with the RCC as the central decision-making body. As such, the RCC was a unique institution with no functional or structural precedent in Egypt. The RCC itself became an important institutional mechanism for building coalitions with key social groups previously excluded from the state, recruiting and reproducing new members into the political elite by staffing the bureaucracy with new and trusted allies, and, in relatively short order, purging dissenters and potential opponents. In sum, once in place and operational, the RCC exerted considerable influence over the future institutional development of the new state, even after its dissolution in 1956.

In essence new institutions were being designed, spinning off others, and in the process deepening the state’s hold on power. Throughout, Nasser kept increasing his personal hold over the state. Between 1953 and 1964 Egypt saw five separate constitutions (in 1953, 1956, 1958, 1962 and 1964), each of which ‘was formulated to fit the president’s political objectives and directions’. Nasser and his increasingly narrow inner-circle never did quite stop being hands-on rulers, but their efforts to maintain power – or, more accurately, their scramble to do so – assumed added weight and urgency in 1967–68. The agency–institutions scale tipped in one direction or another depending on the context within which state actors and institutions found themselves.

A similarly complex set of interwoven dynamics were at work during the first decade of the life of the post-revolutionary state that was inaugurated in Iran in 1979. Given that the Islamic Republic arose out of the chaos and turmoil of a mass-based, initially spontaneous revolution, the process of reconstituting viable and lasting formal state structures and institutions evolved in a slightly less coordinated and more haphazard fashion as compared to the case of Egypt. Nevertheless, the oscillating predominance of agency–institution influences was just as evident in Khomeini’s Iran as they were in Nasserist Egypt.

Throughout 1977 and the early months of 1978, scattered and loosely organized acts of rebellion in Tehran and elsewhere slowly snowballed into a full-blown, mass-based revolution against a seemingly invincible monarchy with an impressive army and an elaborate state security service. As the brewing revolution gathered momentum, a steady implosion of the monarchical system ensued, exposing the state’s deep institutional decay and fragility. With the collapse of the Pahlavi regime seeming increasingly inevitable, Ayatollah Khomeini moved quickly to consolidate his position as the leader of an emerging revolution and to lay the foundations of the post-revolutionary order. In December 1978, while still in exile, he constituted a Revolutionary Council (RC), to which he appointed some of his closest aides and advisors. Very similar to the RCC in Egypt, the Revolutionary Council became the nucleus for an evolving future state in post-revolutionary Iran, with most of its members going on to occupy some of the most important posts in the new regime. The Council quickly became the central decision-making body in charge of guiding the revolution from that point on, acting as a quasi-state organization in the face of collapsing Pahlavi authority.
Soon the tide of the revolution could no longer be stopped. Daily protests drew hundreds of thousands of Iranians demanding the monarchy’s abolition and the return of ‘Imam’ Khomeini to Iran; widespread strikes had brought the country’s economy to a standstill; and the army was being deserted by an estimated 1,000 to 1,200 soldiers a day. The Shah finally faced the inevitable and left the country on 16 January 1979. On 1 February 1979, Khomeini, now the undisputed leader of the revolution and the nation’s Imam, returned to Iran amid triumphant celebrations. Over the next two weeks, the Pahlavi state steadily withered away, culminating in the army’s declaration of neutrality on 11 February. By the next day, 12 February 1979, the Iranian monarchy had come to an end.

As the monarchy’s collapse was being finalized, the institutional mechanisms for a new state were already in place. On 11 February, Khomeini publicly endorsed the Revolutionary Council as the supreme decision-making and legislative authority in the country. This move by the leader of the revolution, as it turned out, was to have lasting and significant consequences for the evolving institutional features of the state. The Council became a key institutional innovation from which almost all of the other political institutions of the new regime evolved. Not long after its formation, seven of its members were tasked with forming a provisional government, headed by long-time activist Mehdi Bazargan, who became the prime minister. Within a few weeks, a popular referendum overwhelmingly endorsed the establishment of an ‘Islamic Republic’.

The Provisional Government drafted a constitution, one that was largely secular and liberal-democratic. But a number of highly influential figures insisted that this should be done by an elected assembly. In the meanwhile, the Islamic Republican Party (IRP) was formed, with Khomeini’s blessing, and began advancing more traditionalist, clerically oriented agendas and policy positions. The IRP was able to dominate the Assembly of Experts that was elected in August 1979 for the purposes of drafting a constitution, and the final document produced as a result largely reflected the Islamic character of the new state. Most notably, the constitution featured the novel institution of the Velayat-e Faqih, or the rule of a supreme religious leader, the theoretical basis of which had been the cornerstone of Khomeini’s writings. By mid-November 1979, when the draft of the constitution was completed, Khomeini was proclaimed as the Faqih.

In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, thousands of local ‘revolutionary committees’ had sprung up in Tehran and elsewhere led by local youths who often took the law into their own hands. In May 1979, the Revolutionary Council established a Revolutionary Guards Corps to exercise central authority over the loosely organized committees. With the regular armed forces in shambles and subject to periodic and often deadly purges because of their suspect loyalties, the Revolutionary Guards went on to become the Islamic Republic’s primary instrument for internal coercion and military defence. The Revolutionary Council also asserted itself in the judicial arena, when it issued guidelines for and determined the jurisdiction of the numerous revolutionary tribunals that had sprung up around the country.

By late 1979, divisions within the Revolutionary Council were becoming increasingly evident, especially between the more traditionalist, IRP-centred clerics and the council’s more secular members. The IRP was caught off-guard in the
presidential elections of January 1980, losing to the independent Abolhassan Bani Sadr, who had also been a member of the Council. But the IRP quickly regrouped, dominated the parliamentary elections that followed, and was able to force its choice of prime minister on the president. By mid-1980, with the legislature in session, the new state had finally acquired all its institutional features.

Within 18 months of the first presidential elections, with Khomeini’s blessing, the IRP-dominated parliament impeached and eventually brought down Bani Sadr in June 1981. In the new presidential elections that followed, the IRP’s candidate won easily. By mid-1981, with the American ‘hostage crisis’ and the war with Iraq providing the larger backdrop, thanks largely to the shrewdness and determination of the IRP, the domination of the Islamic Republican system by Ayatollah Khomeini and his clerical allies was complete.

All key institutions of the state that were now in place – chief among them the presidency, the parliament (Majles), the Revolutionary Guards Corps, the revolutionary tribunals, the IRP, and the Velayat-e Faqih – invariably traced their genesis back to the Revolutionary Council. The Council itself was a novel institutional device with no precedent in modern Iranian history. Soon after its establishment, it gave rise to a number of other institutions that were similarly unique. Clearly, power politics, calculated manoeuvres, and rational decisions were instrumental in shaping the early institutional features of the Islamic Republic. Once those early institutional arrangements were in place, they then spun off or greatly influenced the evolution and the lives of other institutions.

The fate of the IRP is instructive in this respect. By the mid-1980s, the once mighty party had become an institutional forum for infighting over the economy. Although the party kept winning presidential and parliamentary elections, it was now rife with factionalism and, at least for Ayatollah Khomeini and his increasingly narrow inner circle, it had become more of a liability than an asset. In fact, factional infighting within the IRP threatened to expose deep fissures within the Islamic Republic’s leadership.73 ‘There is a danger’, wrote the party’s leaders to Khomeini, ‘that forming political parties will give rise to disputes with the result that the unanimity of the nation will be impaired and energy will be wasted in fighting and eliminating one another.’74 Responding to their ‘request’, in 1987 Khomeini agreed to the IRP’s dissolution.

The disbanding of the IRP turned out to be the first in a number of important institutional changes and adjustments that the new state’s leaders made beginning in the late 1980s. Born out of revolution and war, by the late 1980s the state was facing serious crises on multiple levels.75 The war with Iraq was going from bad to worse, and the economy was in serious disarray. Factionalism still kept rearing its head. Moreover, the triumvirate executive that divided power between the Velayat-e Faqih, the president and the prime minister was proving to be highly inefficient and often dysfunctional. The ensuing institutional, military and political paralysis made it necessary for state leaders to once again proactively initiate a series of far-reaching institutional changes. More importantly, with the frail Ayatollah in ill health, there was keen awareness on the part of state leaders, including Khomeini himself, of the need to find alternative solutions to his charismatic authority. Khomeini was also a Marja’, a Source of Emulation, and few of the remaining Marja’s were either willing to take on the position of the Faqih or were acceptable to Khomeini. Not surprisingly, in a major departure from the original institutional design of the
republic, Khomeini now wanted the *Marja‘iyyat* qualification for the office of the *Velayat-e Faqih* to be removed from the constitution in order to make the position more accessible to a wider pool of potential candidates.\(^76\)

Despite his advanced age, Khomeini once again made his overwhelming presence felt. To end the chronic disagreements between the Majles and the Guardian Council – the latter designed to oversee and ratify parliamentary bills – in February 1988 Khomeini ordered the creation of an Expediency Council and charged it with resolving legislative differences between the two institutions. The following month, at the instigation of some members of his inner circle, Khomeini dismissed his designated successor, Ayatollah Montazeri, after the latter had openly criticized the government’s harsh treatment of dissidents. In July 1988, following severe losses by Iranian military forces, Khomeini reluctantly agreed to accept the United Nations resolution calling for a ceasefire with Iraq.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, in April 1989 Khomeini ordered the president to direct a revision of the 1979 constitution in order to remedy some of the institutional and ideological confusions embodied in the original document. The ensuing constitutional changes reflected a perfect compromise between deliberate crafting and institutional inertia, with the new state institutions that were created in 1979 revised or streamlined in an effort to enhance the state’s overall efficacy. The office of the prime minister was abolished and the powers of the presidency were expanded; the requirement that the *Faqih* also be a *Marja‘* was removed, and the office was also given more extensive powers; and the institution of the Guardian Council, which up until then had been operating on an *ad hoc* basis, was officially codified in the constitution. On 3 June 1989, as the proposed revisions to the constitution were still being deliberated, Ayatollah Khomeini died. Soon thereafter, the proposed amendments were passed, and a ‘second republic’ was inaugurated.\(^77\)

Once again, the agency–institutions pendulum was in full swing.

Iran, like the other two cases examined before it, illustrates perfectly the oscillation between leaders and institutional inertia as the primary causes of institutional change. The post-revolutionary leadership crafted the state, whose institutions gradually assumed momentums of their own. When it appeared that the direction in which these institutions were evolving did not fit with the leadership’s original vision, state leaders once again assumed proactive postures in relation to the institutional make-up of the state and implemented what they perceived as corrective measures. Regardless of the wisdom and efficacy of these correctives, their primary impetus had to do with the deliberate, calculated efforts of leaders rather than dynamics endogenous to the institutions themselves.

Institutionalist explanations of authoritarian durability often concentrate on the incumbent elites’ ability to forge successful coalitions and prevent defections, maintain access to coercive institutions, or deflate the powers of their opponents through co-option. Missing from these analyses has been greater attention to the ability and willingness of authoritarian incumbents to actively set up, manipulate, and if necessary to disband institutions in order to enhance their chances of survival. As the cases of the National Assembly, the RCC and the Revolutionary Council demonstrate in Kuwait, Egypt and Iran respectively, each of these institutions was
set up to recruit new elites into the state, forge and strengthen coalitions with social actors, and enhance elite access to instruments of power. But each institution also started to change as a result of internal dynamics within itself, and once those changes began to be perceived as inimical to the health of the authoritarian regime, the institution was drastically changed or simply disbanded. Purposive institutional change was employed to preserve the authoritarian regime.

In the specific cases of Kuwait, Egypt and Iran, as in many other developing countries, changes to state institutions have been facilitated through a combination of deliberate political crafting, path dependence, and institutional layering, each solidified and deepened through the logic of increasing returns, the drive to enhance staying power, or the responses of emerging political elites to perceived or real threats from within or from the outside. In each case, political actors initially implemented a grand design on which an elaborate, carefully crafted political system was based. Once the initial frenzy of institution-building was over, a relatively brief period of institutional stasis followed. Increasingly, existing institutions were modified, and in many cases new ones were added to the menu of those already existing within the state, in order to enhance and to protect the powers of authoritarian incumbents. At the same time, the range of possible options for institutional choice was increasingly narrowed, and many existing institutions adapted themselves to new, emerging realities in order to survive.

A number of important lessons can be drawn here for the broader field of comparative historical analysis and, especially in relation to the Middle East of today, for the study of state-building. Insofar as comparative historical analysis is concerned, much can be gained by proponents of both rational choice and path dependency if they demonstrate greater sensitivity concerning each other’s arguments. In particular, the study of institutional change must pay greater attention to context and time, especially insofar as the life stages of institutions are concerned.

Ultimately, in non-democratic systems, changes to state institutions result from a combination of agency and path dependence, the former being more prominent when political institutionalization is underway and the latter when consolidation begins to take hold. Path dependence tends to set in as state institutions begin to become consolidated, assume regularized and predictable patterns of internal behaviour, and are therefore able to exert greater constraints on state actors. Finally, both human agency and institutional path dependency play important roles when and if state leaders initiate corrective actions aimed at resolving institutional deadlocks or enhancing their political efficacy and their hold on power.

At the time of this writing, there are at least two new regimes in the Middle East that are in the process of taking shape, in Afghanistan and in Iraq. The Palestinian Authority is also a relatively new, state-like entity, although by now it has at least ten years of history behind it. These and other states at similarly early stages of political institutionalization and consolidation have a unique opportunity to lay democratic bases on which future developments can take place. And, even though in each of these three cases the institutional features of the state have already been laid out and existing institutions have set out to consolidate themselves, their comparative youth still allows for more malleability and change than would otherwise be the case later on. At least in these countries in the Middle East, there is still an opportunity to ‘get it right’. One can only hope that this opportunity is not lost.
Notes


15. Ibid.


18. Ibid., p.163.


24. Ibid.


31. Ibid.


37. According to Mahoney, ‘junctures tend to be “critical” because once a particular option is selected it becomes progressively more difficult to return to the initial point when multiple alternatives were still available’ J. Mahoney, ‘Path Dependence in Historical Sociology’, Theory and Society, Vol.29, No.4 (2000), p.513.


42. Ibid., pp.16–17.


45. Baaklini makes the following observation: ‘The dissolution of the legislature in Kuwait can be viewed as an indication of the importance it assumed and the serious threat it posed to the authority of the ruling family. In fact, contrary to the prevailing notions of why legislatures are dissolved in developing countries, it is often the case that a strong legislature is dissolved whereas a rubber-stamp weak legislature is tolerated by the executive.’ A. Baaklini, ‘Legislatures in the Gulf Area: The Experience of Kuwait, 1961–1976’, International Journal of Middle East Studies, Vol.14, No.3 (1982), p.374.

46. Ibid., p.376.

47. Ibid.


51. King Farouk was eventually allowed to abdicate and was given safe passage to Italy.


53. Ibid., pp.131–2.


55. Ibid., p.54.
68. Ibid., pp.22–35.
72. Ibid., p.61.