

The Quandary of Bad Governance in the Arab World

Imad K. Harb

April 24, 2017



Arab Center Washington DC
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

Observers and analysts consider good governance to be among the topmost priorities in the Arab world. Many decry the status of institutional life, rule of law, government performance and effectiveness, and widespread corruption. Indeed, several manifestations of instability in many Arab societies are blamed on the way governments plan and operate as well as on limited public input in decision-making. Whatever its fate today, the “Arab Spring” that swept across many Arab countries in 2011 was a clear indication of Arab citizens’ frustration with the failure and lack of responsiveness of their political systems.

A recent survey conducted by the Doha, Qatar-based Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies points to the Arab public’s low approval levels of government effectiveness and general governance. These views are similar to those expressed in four previous iterations of the same annual survey, the Arab Opinion Index, between 2011 and 2015.

The latest survey, conducted during the last four months of 2016, solicited the opinions of over 18,000 respondents from 12 Arab countries (Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Tunisia). In addition to questions about democracy, religion, regional and global powers, and the Islamic State, respondents were asked about their level of confidence in state institutions, their faith in the rule of law, and their opinions about levels of corruption and government efforts to fight it.

Unflattering Views of Civilian Institutions

Arab public opinion about governance and civilian state institutions is indicative of continuing disillusionment and despair. Only 24 percent of all respondents expressed high confidence in governments and government ministries, while 31 percent were somewhat confident in them. While the Saudi Arabian, Mauritanian, and Kuwaiti governments led the approval numbers (94, 80, and 78 percent, respectively), approval ratings were lowest in Iraq (18 percent), Lebanon (21 percent), and Morocco (43 percent).

Concomitantly, respondents were split about governmental efficiency and delivery of services. Fourteen percent of them thought essential government services were very good, 34 percent good, 22 percent very bad, and 27 percent bad. For specific countries, Saudi Arabia led the pack with an aggregate “good” and “very good” evaluation of 84 percent, followed by Kuwait with 82 percent, and Jordan with 65 percent.

Similarly, an aggregate 52 percent of respondents had no confidence in legislative councils. Surprisingly, 88 percent of Saudi Arabian respondents thought highly of their Consultative Assembly—so far appointed by the king—and 78 percent of Kuwaitis expressed high and moderate confidence in their National Assembly (despite its dissolution by the emir several times in the last decade), and 68 percent of Mauritians. It was remarkable that only 10 percent of Iraqis and 24 percent of Lebanese approved of their parliaments, arguably the freest legislative councils in the Arab world. At

the same time, slightly over half of respondents thought that their countries' representative councils enact laws to protect individual liberties, preserve the interests of all sectors of society, hold the government accountable, or exercise oversight over public expenditure.

Confirming the Arab public's disregard for party life and politics, 65 percent of respondents expressed differing degrees of distrust in political parties. Only in Mauritania and Egypt did respondents see them as beneficial for public life, and only by small majorities – 52 and 51 percent, respectively – while a mere 35 percent of Sudanese approved of them. Their lowest approval ratings were 10 percent in Iraq and 20 percent in both Jordan and Morocco. This general lack of approval is most likely related to the history of authoritarian rule in the Arab world, which has rendered political parties ineffective or made them lackeys of executive authority. The fact that 53 percent of all respondents reported that they had no party affiliation may also contribute to explaining their disapproval of political parties.

Given the state of institutional life in Arab states, these results could not arguably have been any different. While the Arab world boasts of the existence of myriad institutions – ministries, state-controlled agencies, legislative bodies, sanctioned political parties, even constitutions – executive authority relies more on personalism and power relations. Institutional norms are more likely to be ignored or redefined to serve the interests of executive powers. Cronyism and patron-client relations deprive bureaucracies of the opportunity to recruit talented administrators and effective technocrats. Even when these are

recruited, they more often than not hew to the whims of political appointees or loyalists.

On the other hand, 65 percent of Arab respondents had confidence in the judiciary, including 24 percent who expressed a high degree of confidence, while 32 percent had none. Saudi Arabians had the highest confidence with 95 percent, followed by the Jordanians with 86 percent and the Mauritanians with 83 percent. Worst numbers came from Iraq (36 percent), Lebanon (49 percent), and Algeria (51 percent). This was punctuated by the opinion of only 48 percent of respondents who thought that the principle of a fair trial is upheld in their countries, while 40 percent did not. As for the rule of law, only 24 percent believed that it is applied universally, 20 percent rejected the premise out of hand, and 54 percent thought that some groups receive favorable treatment.

These results indicate that the judicial branch in Arab states may not be the true check on executive authority or the right conduit for justice. Operating as it is in a constricted political environment, subjected to interference by the powerful, and overseen by governments, the judiciary is unable to administer fair judgment. What makes this worse is the fact that military courts are readily employed in trying civil cases as governments seek to suppress opposition in the name of security and order. The case of Egypt is illustrative: military courts have been involved in trying and convicting thousands of political activists who were tortured into confessing to crimes.

The Uncanny Confidence in the Security Sector

Interestingly, despite the dominance of a repressive security sector in Arab societies, 87 percent of Arabs expressed either high or moderate degrees of confidence in their armed forces, 70 percent in state intelligence services, and 72 percent in the police. These results point to the impact of the Arab world's worrisome times—especially as the Islamic State continues to control large swathes of Syria and Iraq and civil wars eviscerate Syria, Yemen, and Libya. They also point to the Arabs' belief that the proverbial "man on horseback" may be the only one knowledgeable or firm enough to arrest a declining political culture—although historically speaking, military men have not done well in running state institutions.

Moreover, and reflecting the worries about security, the aggregate high approval rating for the armed forces (87 percent) has witnessed an increase since 2011, the first year the Arab Opinion Index measured it, when it was 77 percent. This increase varied between countries; for instance, confidence in the Iraqi army went from 62 percent in 2015 to 78 percent in 2016 (this number is the sum of the answers for both "high" and "moderate" confidence). In Mauritania, it increased from 77 percent to 93 percent in the same years. By comparison, while an aggregate 55 percent showed high and moderate confidence in the police in 2011, those responding in 2016 gave the service a 72 percent rating. As for the intelligence services, their fortunes improved by 21 percentage points, from 49 percent in 2011 to 70 percent in 2016.

Widespread Corruption

Finally, respondents in the 2016 survey had roughly the same views of corruption in the Arab world that prevailed in previous years. An overwhelming majority, 93 percent, considered corruption widespread, 46 percent of whom thought it was rampant and stifling. Only 4 percent denied that it exists. Additionally, there is a general belief that governments are unwilling to fight the scourge of corruption or are simply incapable of protecting against it. The only variation among countries was in the degree to which respondents considered corruption to be rampant, from 18 percent in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to 79 percent in Tunisia and 73 percent in Lebanon. In a sense, this could be seen as a reflection of the state's ability to regulate public affairs and limit graft but, unfortunately, not to end it. Furthermore, the Index showed a general disillusionment among respondents about their governments' efforts to fight the scourge of corruption in their countries.

The results regarding views of government corruption from the 2016 Arab Opinion Index were confirmed by other studies. A recent report by Transparency International, the Corruption Perceptions Index, found that "half the world's most corrupt countries" are Arab. Ninety percent of the countries in the Middle East and North Africa region "scored below 50, meaning they failed at obtaining suitable anti-corruption standards."

Only an aggregate 49 percent believed that governments are serious about fighting corruption; an equal number believed the opposite. Specifically, and reflecting the states'

abilities, only 2 percent of Lebanese and 3 percent of Iraqis thought their governments were very serious about fighting corruption; by contrast, 56 percent of Saudi Arabians believed this about their government. As the latter tries to push through a reform agenda that could wean the economy off hydrocarbons, the task of fighting graft is essential. In his latest royal decrees on April 22, for example, King Salman bin Abdel-Aziz dismissed the Minister of State for Civil Service Khaled al-Araj for allegedly appointing his own son to a high position in the ministry.

Lessons Learned

The Arab Opinion Index of 2016 has shed some important and statistically supported light on deep concerns in Arab governance and good government. As an indicator of general Arab opinion—the populations of the countries covered in the index constitute close to 90 percent of all Arabs—the index shows clear dissatisfaction with institutional performance and delivery of services, the most direct manifestations of a government’s function and role in society. Results also indicate a distrust among Arabs of their governments in the arenas of the rule of law and in a fair trial. The security sector, however, received the highest approval among respondents, just when the Arab world is confronting the stigma of military rule and authoritarian repression. This last fact is a cause for concern despite a general feeling among majorities of Arabs—made clear in other

sections of the same survey— that democracy is the most desirable form of government and that is it compatible with Islamic principles.

Looking at their lives through the prisms of governmental inefficiency, lethargic institutional performance, poor rule of law standards, and widespread corruption, it is no wonder that Arab citizens doubt there will be a better future for their children. If the 2011 Arab Spring wave of protests showed anything, it is that people, especially the young, will seek change despite repression.

Although the survey showed a reluctance among Arabs in 2016 to evaluate the Arab Spring positively, one must be cautious in assuming that Arabs will rush to revolt again as they did in 2011. Only 41 percent of respondents thought the Arab revolts were “very positive” or “moderately positive” while 50 percent saw them as “negative” or “very negative.” What may have a tremendous impact on the fate of revolt, however, is that 82 percent of Egyptians still look at their revolution positively (of them, 48 percent very positively). With Egypt being the most populous Arab state that has a very repressive political environment, it would be hard to dismiss the possibility of a recurrence of its January 2011 revolt. Interestingly, 53 percent of Saudi Arabians and 62 percent of Kuwaitis still look positively at the Arab Spring experiment; the ruling royal families in these countries, in contrast, arguably consider their citizens’ opinions to be a harbinger of undesirable political change in the Arab world.

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