

# THE DOG THAT DIDN'T BARK: THE POLITICAL COMPLACENCE OF THE EMERGING MIDDLE CLASS (WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST)

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Over the last two decades, the twin forces of globalization and economic growth have given rise to a remarkable sociological phenomenon: the enormous expansion of the middle class in the developing world. Between 1990 and 2005 the emerging middle class has nearly doubled in size, rising from 1.4 billion people to 2.6, according to economists Surjit Bhalla and Martin Ravallion.<sup>1</sup> What are the political implications of this development? Past interpretations of major works in the social science cannon, from Aristotle and Marx to Lipset and Moore, have suggested a strong link between the growth of the middle class and the establishment and consolidation of democracy. But, are we right to believe that this surge in middle-class growth, historically the third such surge since 1800,<sup>2</sup> will also lead to the expansion of the third wave?

Careful analysis prescribes caution. "Middle class" is an imprecise term, and the definition embraced by economists and journalists heralding the current "middle-class surge" may fail to reproduce the qualities that led prior social scientists to link the middle class to democracy. Specifically, the

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**Political Power and Social Theory, Volume 21, 125-141**

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**ISSN: 0198-8719/doi:10.1108/S0198-8719(2010)0000021010**

income parameters used to define the emerging middle class may be insufficient to prompt the value shift that some social scientists argue is an essential prerequisite for championing democracy. In addition, the extrapolation of political behavior from an income category divorced from historical context is a risky strategy. For example, should the middle class emerge in a context of state sponsorship, it is unlikely that it will muster the power and interest necessary to champion democratization, no matter its income level.

The best evidence for this comes from the Middle East – long a region of paradox when it comes to the subject of middle classes and democracy. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is endowed with the largest middle class (as a proportion of its society) when compared to other regions in the developing world; nevertheless, the MENA has remained the least democratic of all of developing regions. Close study suggests that the “middle class” in the MENA does not enjoy sufficient prosperity to trigger the massive value change that leads people to prioritize democracy as a goal. In addition, the persistent centrality of the state in providing jobs, benefits, and economic opportunities robs the middle class of the autonomy necessary to foster the power and interest to champion democracy.

To support this analysis the essay will begin by spelling out the definition of the middle class (and how social scientists differ in their understanding of this concept). It will then elucidate the causal mechanisms underlying the classic social science theories that link development of the middle class with democracy. Finally, it will explore the empirical reality of the emerging middle class in the MENA and use this region to illuminate some of the barriers that prevent the middle class from acting as democracy advocates. While the development of the middle class in the MENA has not yet given rise to powerful champions of democracy, analysis of the region suggests the conditions that might make such advocacy possible in the future both in the MENA region and worldwide.

## **DEFINING THE MIDDLE CLASS AND ITS ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Before exploring the political implications of the emerging middle class, best to begin by defining the term. The economists who herald the growth of the middle class in the developing world today largely construe the term solely as an income category. This is in stark contrast to Marx, who defined class

in terms of a social group's relation to the means of production, and it is in stark contrast to Weber, who defined class in terms of a group's pattern of consumption. But even if economists agree to conceive of the middle class as an income category, they differ on how to define this category – whether in relative or absolute terms.<sup>3</sup> Some, like Lester Thurow, define middle class relationally. People are middle class if their income falls between 75% and 125% of the median income in a given society. Others define middle class in absolute terms. In the case of Milanovic and Yitzhaki, the boundaries of the contemporary global middle class are set between the average income levels that currently prevail in Brazil and Italy (threshold and ceiling, respectively).<sup>4</sup> Still others like Diana Farrell define middle class in terms of relative access to discretionary spending. For Farrell, the middle class is distinguished from the poor in that it does not live “hand to mouth.” Members of the middle class are defined as those who have roughly a third of their income left over for discretionary spending after covering the basic cost of food and shelter.

The differences in these definitions are not trivial, not least for the political implications that flow from each. A definition focused on access to discretionary funds, for example, would prove more important to social scientists concerned about generating the “value shift” that some believe is key to embracing the cause of democracy. But such implications are far from the concerns of most economists. To the contrary, most economists are interested in the emerging middle class for its potential to fuel economic growth. For economists writing from the perspective of corporate America, the new middle class is celebrated for its growing consumption capacity and the expanding market opportunities this creates for global capitalism. For economists writing from the perspective of the late developing countries, the new middle class is celebrated for its capacity to serve as an engine of local growth. The new middle class is hailed for its ability to accumulate capital, its “gift for entrepreneurship,” its investment in health and education – all of which enhances the prospects for investment, growth, and improved productivity in developing economies (Banerjee & Duflo, 2008).

But if economists are enamored of the new middle class for economic reasons, political sociologists are enthusiastic about its expansion for political ones. A long tradition in the social sciences links the size of the middle class with the robustness of democracy. Consequently, a surge in the size of this class raises hope for the proliferation and consolidation of democracy around the world. This linkage between size of middle class and vigor of democracy may be traced all the way back to Aristotle who argued that the larger the middle class, the more likely the chances of effective,

cooperative, self-government.<sup>5</sup> In more recent times this linkage has been touted by the modernization school, most famously enunciated by Seymour Martin Lipset in his canonical piece “Some Social Requisites of Democracy.”<sup>6</sup> Along the way, some have added Marx and Moore to the catalog of authors who link the middle class and democratization, pointing to Marx’s pairing of the rise of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist mode of production with the rise of (sham) democracy and to Moore’s most famous, if often misquoted phrase, “no bourgeoisie, no democracy.”

Before exploring the causal logic underlying the linkage between a large middle class and democracy, let us make quick work of the inclusion of Marx and Moore in this school of thought. A careful reading of Marx and Moore shows that in fact neither theorist was discussing “the middle class” per se. Rather, both were focused on a very different animal: the bourgeoisie/capitalist class. The difference between the middle class (an income category) and the bourgeoisie/capitalist class (a social group defined in terms of its relations to the means of production) is well known to any student of sociology and will prove crucial later as we illuminate the causal mechanism that links social group to political outcome. Suffice it to say here that neither Marx nor Moore makes any presumptions linking the robustness of democracy to the size of the middle class.

But many other theorists do assert this linkage – to the point that it has become something of an unexamined truism in the field. At this point, it seems worthwhile to explore the causal logic underlying this linkage to determine whether it can justifiably be extrapolated to the contemporary experience of middle-class surge and whether it warrants optimism about the democratizing potential of this surge for the developing world.

## **CAUSAL MECHANISM LINKING THE MIDDLE CLASS AND DEMOCRACY**

Perhaps the most well-known mechanism linking the middle class and democracy involves public attitudes and societal values. The argument, drawing on the classic insight of social psychologist Abraham Maslow, is that once human beings have climbed above poverty and the daily scramble to meet basic human needs (food, shelter, safety, and security), they are free to focus on other less pressing but nonetheless compelling human motivations: the desire for belonging, social esteem, and “self-actualization” (Maslow, 2009). In political life this psychological evolution is reflected in

the shift in public values that takes place as societies become wealthier and the size of the non-poor stratum grows. As documented by Ron Inglehart, the World Values Survey, and countless spin-off values surveys (Afrobarometer, Latinobarometer, etc.), people place more emphasis on values such as freedom and self-determination as they become richer and are certain that their basic needs will be met. A recent survey undertaken by the Pew Research Center illustrates this further by documenting the political values of the rising middle class. The survey found that middle-class people in a sample of 13 middle-income countries (e.g., Chile, Russia, Malaysia, and Venezuela) are more likely to assign importance to democratic institutions and individual liberties (e.g., competitive elections, fair treatment under the law, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press) than the poor.<sup>7</sup> The fact that the middle class “tends to express a somewhat more intense desire for democracy” suggests an important causal linkage between the size of middle class and the robustness of democracy. A class that prizes democracy is more likely to agitate for it.

Besides this shift in attitudes, there are a number of other factors that link the rise of the middle class and democracy. Four are suggested in the Lipset’s canonical piece “Some Social Requisites of Democracy.” While not exhaustive they are indicative of the causal reasoning underlying the modernization school. As a mnemonic device, I will synopsise these four as literacy, leisure, moderation, and “grease.”

First, the rise of the middle class is associated with a rise in literacy, educational levels, and access to ideas through the mass media such as newspapers, radio, and television. (Today one might add the Internet as an equally important medium of mass communication.) These factors give rise to a citizenry increasingly empowered to digest political ideas and engage in political debate. They contribute to the creation of an engaged participatory citizenry – an essential foundation for healthy democracy.

Second, the growth of the middle class signals the multiplication of people with the presumed leisure to engage in activities as secondary and frivolous as politics. Freed from the dawn-to-dusk grind to provide for their families, members of the middle class are able to engage in politics and thus again provide the participatory foundation for a healthy democracy.

Third, the growth of a middle class is associated with the growth of political moderation in society. Concern about political moderation was something that especially animated Lipset – understandably so since he was writing in the postwar period when extremist mass movements such as fascism and communism were seen by many as the most serious threat to the survival of democracy. Lipset believed that the prevalence of desperate

poverty constituted an environment most likely to make the masses receptive to extremist political movements. The growth of the middle class, by contrast, signaled the liberation of many from dire poverty. It constituted the best prophylactic against the appeal of extremism and the surest means to secure the survival of democracy.<sup>8</sup>

Fourth, the growth of the middle class signals an increase in generalized prosperity or, for want of a better word, “grease.” The spread of material ease in society is politically important because material ease greases the wheel of conflict resolution. In the context of plenty, conflicts become less bitterly zero-sum and hence easier to resolve. And in a political system like democracy that is built upon the notion of a nonviolent conflict resolution, the availability of such grease is essential to the effective functioning of the system.

## PROBLEMATIC EXTRAPOLATION

Given the definition of middle class as income category and given the causal mechanisms listed above linking the rise of the middle class and democracy (attitudinal shifts, increased literacy, increased leisure, moderation, and “grease”) are we justified in drawing optimistic conclusions about the rise of the new middle class and its prospects for expanding the third wave in the developing world?

Two problems are worthy of note. First, for the causal mechanisms discussed above to hold, the notion “middle class” must entail a certain degree of economic prosperity or ease. That is, only if the income of the middle class is high enough to free people from concern about meeting their basic needs (for food, shelter, and security) will they experience the attitudinal shift predicted by Maslow and Inglehart that is essential to fostering democracy. And only if the income of the middle class is high enough to afford higher literacy, leisure, literacy, and “grease,” will the rise of this class really signal the conditions that persuaded authors like Lipset to believe that the rise of the middle class will bolster resilient democracy.

The question is whether the new middle class hailed by contemporary headlines is indeed the master of prosperity sufficient to meet these political objectives? In fact if one looks carefully at the 1.2 billion people who have recently expanded the size of the middle class in the developing world, this group conforms to a very specific definition of the middle class – one put forward by Martin Ravallion (2009). Ravallion defines the middle class as everyone who is not poor but not yet rich. More specifically, Ravallion

defines the middle class as everyone who lives above the poverty line of \$2 a day but has still not exceeded the upper limit of \$17 a day. However, as Ravallion himself points out, the vast majority of people who compose the recent surge in the “middle class” are clustered at the \$2–\$3 a day level. Ravallion calls these people the “vulnerable middle class.” They barely keep their heads above water. They hardly feel their prosperity is “secure.” By contrast, if we were to adopt Diana Farrell’s definition of middle class (i.e., those who retain roughly a third of their income for discretionary spending after covering the cost of basic food and shelter) then the people considered middle class would likely fall in the \$9–\$13 a day range (at least). But the number of people in this range rose only by 95 million between 1990 and 2005, *just a small fraction* of the “middle class” surge of 1.2 billion touted by the news headlines.<sup>9</sup>

What this suggests is that the recent surge in the size of the middle class (or more accurately, the “non-poor”), while significant from an economic point of view, is unlikely to have the political impact that many optimists expect. This is because the prosperity is not there to fuel the causal mechanisms that past analysts have identified as the key factors linking robust democracy with the rise of the middle class.<sup>10</sup>

The second observation that may dampen our optimism about the democratizing potential of the middle-class surge concerns the specific challenge that democratization poses and whether the causal linkages elaborated above are sufficient to meet this challenge.

More specifically, the four causal mechanisms suggested by the modernization school linking the middle class and democracy (i.e., literacy, leisure, moderation, and grease) constitute utterly persuasive explanations for why democracy might be correlated with rising GDP per capita, or, as Przeworski et al. have argued, why the *survival* of democracy might be correlated with rising GDP per capita (Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, & Limongi, 2000). Clearly, the presence of an engaged informed citizenry with the leisure and the skills to participate in the political process will contribute to the vigor of a democracy once established. And clearly the presence of material plenty sufficient to moderate conflict will buoy the longevity of any political system. However, these factors do not give us much leverage on how one might force through the *transition* to democracy or the *deepening* of democracy (in the sense of increasing government accountability and rule of law) in a hostile environment. That is, they do not give us leverage on processes that require the wresting of power from forces that have a titanic interest in not sharing it. Literacy, leisure, moderation, and grease all facilitate the survival of democracy once established, but they do not

give us leverage on how to create democracy in a context of resolute opposition.

To wrest power from elites who don't want to share it requires the combination of factors that are necessary for any ambitious collective political initiative. That is, it requires the combination of *power* and *interest* on the part of the activists. Thus, the pressing question to ask about the current middle-class surge is whether this surge is giving rise to a social force with both the power and interest to carry out democratization.

I am skeptical on both historical and analytic grounds. Historically, I am not sure that a collective force called "the middle class" has ever been central to the process of democratic transition or deepening. Consider the first wave of democratic transition that took place in England, France, and Germany between the 17th and 20th centuries. The standard (albeit caricatured) tale that is told about this transition is that the champions of democracy were specific social classes, linked to the advance of capitalism. By some accounts it was the bourgeoisie (increasingly in conflict with the feudal state and the limitations imposed by that state on capitalist advance) that led the challenge against the ancient regime and pressured it to create representative institutions and predictable rule of law. By other accounts it was the working class (driven by the desire to lessen their exploitation) that lobbied for the expansion of political rights to the nonpropertied and forced the expansion of democracy in a more inclusive direction. In either case, it was specific social classes, driven by specific material interests and armed with specific sources of power (capital for the bourgeoisie, capacity for collective disruption for workers), that led to the advance of democracy.<sup>11</sup>

What role did the middle class play in this process? Clearly, intellectuals and professionals played a role in crafting the debate over democratization in these contexts. That is, they played a major role in the symbolic discourse of this movement. But was the middle class an organized force with clear interest and power, driving this process forward? They are not central characters in the canonical stories of the first wave transitions. And even in the later waves, the schematic versions of these stories typically portray democratic transition as the work of elites in coalition with specific social forces that vary from case to case. Sometimes it is the military that is central to the story. Sometimes the church. Sometimes labor unions. But never does it seem to be the work of a cohesive force called "the middle class."

Skepticism about the role of the middle class also derives from the analytic ambiguity of the term itself. What is the middle class, after all? As used by contemporary economists it is just an income category. The middle class is everybody who is not poor and who is not rich. But is there any



analytic coherence to this category from a political perspective? Does this income group share any compelling power or interest that makes for effective collective action?

Much of what unifies this new middle class in the eyes of Western observers recapitulates a Weberian-style definition of class – class defined by consumption patterns. There is a tendency to assign membership in the modern middle class to anyone who possesses certain status markers of that class. Today that might include ownership of a cell phone or a computer or certain brand name clothes or access to satellite television or the Internet. Of course there is a long history of demarcating the middle class according to consumption patterns. Lipset himself measured the size of the middle class in his 1959 article by counting the number of television, automobiles, and washing machines owned in each country. But does the Weberian definition of class distinguish a group with any coherence of power or interest? The children of state bureaucrats and the children of leading businessmen may all sport the same blue jeans and cell phones, but are their political interests and power likely to be the same?

From a Marxist point of view, the middle class is hardly a class at all. As an income category, the term middle class embraces people with wildly different relations to the means of production. It encompasses civil servants, professionals, academics, merchants, and manufacturers, among others. These people have very different material interests, very different perspectives on property relations, and very different relationships with the state. And it is this latter difference that is especially important for the prospects of embarking on democratization. One lesson that is clear from prior studies of class and democracy is that material independence from the state is a crucial factor in determining who will champion the democratic cause and who will not. In the absence of such autonomy, the incentives are strongly stacked against challenging the nondemocratic status quo.<sup>12</sup> The question is whether the surging new middle class enjoys sufficient autonomy to carry out a democratic agenda. This must be analyzed case by case rather than assumed.

## **LESSONS FROM THE MIDDLE EAST**

Admittedly, the skepticism found here concerning the political promise of the middle class stems from close knowledge of one particular region: the MENA. The MENA region is notable in many ways, not least for the fact that it boasts the largest middle class (measured as a percentage of the

general population) of all developing regions in the world. This is illustrated in Table 1.

The large size of the middle class in the MENA region is a direct consequence of the relatively low level of absolute poverty found in the region (absolute poverty as measured by the standards of the developing world). The number of people who live on incomes below \$2 is less than 17% region-wide. This is illustrated in Table 2.

The relatively large size of the middle class and low level of absolute poverty in the MENA region is not a new phenomenon. In fact, the size of the middle class as a percentage of the general population has changed little over the past 20 years. By 1990 it had already clocked in at 75.5% of the population.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in contrast to the rising middle class in other parts of the world, the MENA's sizable middle class is not a consequence of

**Table 1.** Comparative Size of the Middle Class in Developing Regions (Those Living Between \$2 and \$13 a Day) (2005).

	Percent of Population
East Asia and Pacific	59.3
Of which China	61.8
Latin America and Caribbean	65.8
Middle East and North Africa	78.7
South Asia	25.8
Of which India	24.1
Sub-Saharan Africa	25.8

Source: Martin Ravallion, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

**Table 2.** Comparative Levels of Absolute Poverty in Developing Regions (Those Living Below \$2 a Day) (2005).

	Percent of Population
East Asia and Pacific	38.7
Of which China	36.3
Latin America and Caribbean	17.1
Middle East and North Africa	16.9
South Asia	73.9
Of which India	75.6
Sub-Saharan Africa	72.9

Source: Martin Ravallion, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

**Table 3.** Growth Rates in Developing Regions (%).

	1990–2000	2000	2005	2008
Middle East/North Africa	1.2	3.1	4.5	5.5
East Asia/Pacific	6	7.6	9.1	8
Latin America/Caribbean	1.8	3.9	4.9	4.3
Sub-Saharan Africa	–3	3.9	4.9	5.1

Source: World Bank (2003, 2010).

surging growth thanks to increased integration into the global economy. To the contrary, the MENA region has experienced disappointingly low growth rates over the past two decades compared to most other regions (see Table 3). And the MENA region has largely been left out of the globalization party, as evidenced by the region’s relatively low rates of integration into international trade (and specifically the low level of its export of manufactured goods) as well as its relatively low levels of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) (see Tables 4 and 5).

Rather, the impressive size of the middle class and the low level of absolute poverty in the MENA region are the consequence of several other factors: the prevalence of state “socialist” ideologies that redistributed resources in much of the MENA region during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (and the sticky legacies of these ideologies); the abundance of rents (oil, gas, strategic) that have subsidized state generosity as well as funded family safety nets and charities (the latter primarily via remittances); and the strength of familial and religious networks that have maintained the aforementioned safety nets (Sala i-Martin & Artadi, 2010; Doraid, 2002).

Despite the MENA’s underachievement in terms of global economic integration, the region does not lack for flashy status markers that distinguish modern middle-class consumption throughout the developing world. To the contrary, these markers are evident to even the most casual visitor to the region, often with fascinating local inflection. A walk down the promenade in downtown Cairo last Valentine’s Day turned up several lovely ladies dressed in pink velour track suits coordinated with matching pink hijabs – one with the word JUICY spelled across her posterior. The main boulevards were crammed with vespas home delivering McDonalds and KFC fast food – often with a side order of *koshari*.<sup>14</sup> Shiny shopping malls carrying international brands had popped up everywhere (Singerman & Amar, 2006; de Koning, 2009). And cell phone usage has skyrocketed to the point where even the poor security guards standing watch over city

**Table 4.** Comparative Exports of Manufactures, 1980 and 2004 (in Billions of Current US Dollars).

Country	1980	2004
Middle East		
Algeria	0.04	0.65
Egypt	0.33	2.35
Jordan	0.21	2.79
Kuwait	2.04	1.11 <sup>d</sup>
Morocco	0.59	6.72
Saudi Arabia	0.70	8.88 <sup>e</sup>
Syria	0.14	0.56
Tunisia	0.79	7.51
High-performing comparators		
South Korea	15.68	233.99
Taiwan	17.99	171.55
Large comparators		
China	12.46 <sup>b</sup>	542.20
India	5.03	55.05
Normally endowed comparators		
Bangladesh	0.51	7.30
Brazil	7.49	52.19
Pakistan	1.28	11.42
Turkey	0.78	53.60
Resource-rich comparators		
Botswana	n.a.	2.22 <sup>d</sup>
Indonesia	0.50	40.55
Nigeria	0.02 <sup>a</sup>	0.47 <sup>c</sup>
Venezuela	0.33	3.98

Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators, April 2006; Taiwan Statistical Databook 2005.

Entire Table from Marcus Noland and Howard Pack, *The Arab Economies in a Changing World* (Peterson Institute of International Economics, 2007, p. 102).

<sup>a</sup>1981.

<sup>b</sup>1984.

<sup>c</sup>2003.

<sup>d</sup>2001.

<sup>e</sup>2002.

landmarks and the threadbare rural migrants selling knick knacks on the street could be seen chatting away on their mobiles (see Table 6).

The explosion of all this Western-style consumption is so dazzlingly familiar to Western observers that I'm afraid it hogs our attention and

**Table 5.** Foreign Direct Investment in Developing Regions (in Millions of Dollars).

	2000	2005	2008
Middle East/North Africa	4,885	16,119	30,229
East Asia/Pacific	45,166	104,536	187,724
Latin America/Caribbean	79,343	70,851	125,669
Sub-Saharan Africa	6,800	16,982	33,651

Source: World Bank, 2009, 2010.

**Table 6.** Mobile Cell Phone Subscription in Various MENA Countries (Per 100 People) – 2008.

Algeria	92.72
Bahrain	185.7
Egypt	50.62
Jordan	86.6
Saudi Arabia	142.85
Syria	33.24
Tunisia	89.59
UAE	208.65

Source: ITV World Telecommunications/ICT Indicator Data Base.

creates the impression that a global middle-class lifestyle is pervasive in MENA society. In fact much of this consumption is mere veneer. The vast majority of people in the MENA region still live in poverty by the standards of the Western world. More than 95% of Middle Easterners still live on incomes below \$13 a day<sup>15</sup> and the lion's share of those identified by economists as "middle class" are actually clustered in the lowest ranges of \$2–\$3 a day – technically "middle class" (in the sense of not being absolutely impoverished) but barely holding on.

So for all the flash and glamour of cell phones and shopping malls, most people in the region are still struggling. And as consequence we don't see the shift in public values or the "grease" and moderation that in the past led many theorists to link middle-class growth and democracy. Of course politics in the MENA region remains resolutely authoritarian for many reasons beyond the demographics of the middle class.<sup>16</sup> But the fact that the "middle class" remains relatively poor does not enhance the chances that this social stratum will serve as its champion. Most people have not achieved

sufficient security regarding basic human needs to prioritize the values of freedom and self-actualization associated with democracy.

Besides being relatively poor, the middle class in the MENA is distinguished by another characteristic that compromises the likelihood that it will champion democracy. By and large, the middle class in the MENA lacks the autonomy that is necessary to endow it with the power and interest to push a contentious political agenda. The autonomy of the middle class in the MENA is limited for two reasons.

First, the vast majority of this “middle class” remains in the pay of the state. Most are civil servants, public sector managers, and state-employed professionals. Despite two decades of pieties about shrinking the role of the state in the MENA economy, the public sector remains predominant in nearly every MENA economy and the private sector remains relatively small. Consequently, this middle class is predictably circumspect about challenging state authority and jeopardizing its paycheck. The persistently central role played by the state in the economy explains the middle classes’ persistently anemic attitude toward contentious politics. Championing democratization is not the middle class’ first priority.

Second, even those members of the middle class employed in the private sector fail to enjoy full autonomy. This is because of the prevalence (and persistence) of what John Shuhe Li calls “relation-based” governance rather than “rule-based” governance (Li, 2003). In the MENA, to succeed economically depends on “who you know.” The state’s prevalent role in driving and regulating the economy means that good relations with state elites are essential to economic success even for private sector actors. Clientalism, cronyism, and backscratching remain endemic, and relationships not rules determine who gets the state’s favor. In this context, private sector entrepreneurs do not have the luxury of undertaking contentious political activity.

Consequently, one finds relatively little middle-class mobilization on behalf of democracy in the MENA region. One might speak of the political *complacency* of this class except for the fact that, in private, many will express their discontent with the corruption, inefficiency, and lack of accountability characteristic of the political status quo. It is more accurate to speak of the political *compliance* of this class. Members of the middle class are willing to go along with the regime, to avoid rocking the boat politically, in order to protect their livelihood.<sup>17</sup>

This is not to say there is no democracy movement in the region. The last two decades have seen the multiplication of human rights groups, civil liberties movements, and reform parties all over the MENA. But while inspiring in many ways, these movements have still, by and large, failed to

build a sizable mass base.<sup>18</sup> Many factors come into play here – not least the resolute repressiveness of the authoritarian state (and its rent-subsidized, financial capacity to sustain such repression). But poverty and the lack of the autonomy of the middle class clearly play a role here as well.

This is also not to say that global linkages and global consumption patterns have had no impact on the political ambitions and capacities of the middle class in the MENA. Clearly, the contemporary middle class' access to cell phones, satellite television, and the Internet has had an important impact in terms of spreading ideas and facilitating collective action. To the extent that human rights groups and movements like Kefaya have gotten off the ground there is no question that this technology and global linkage have played a very important role. It is easier to mobilize people for demonstrations with the aid of cell phones and Facebook. Access to global trends has helped to frame the political debate in progressive ways. But in the end ideas and assists only go so far. Unless a sizable segment of the population has the power and interest to mobilize behind democratization, it is unlikely to go far and unfortunately that has been the reality so far in most of the region.

## CONCLUSION

This analysis should dial down overwrought optimism about the political implications of the recent surge in the size of the middle class in the developing world. While the growth of this class is certainly welcome from an economic point of view, its political impact remains ambiguous. This is true because the largest portion of this middle class is still too poor to trigger the causal mechanisms that have led past theorists to link the middle class with robust democracy. This is also true because income category alone, without attention to the context of its emergence, does not necessarily identify a group with coherent power and interest to undertake the contentious work necessary to build democracy in a hostile environment. Without autonomy, such contentious activism is an unlikely prospect. At the same time, the analysis presented here does help identify those qualities likely to give rise to a “middle class” that will champion democracy. Specifically, a middle class that commands at least a third of its income for discretionary spending beyond its basic needs (i.e., a middle class that is more than just “not poor”) is most likely to trigger the causal linkages between middle-class size and robust democracy. In addition, a middle class whose livelihood is not hostage to state support or good will is also more likely to develop the power and interest necessary to champion democracy. The negative example

of this is evident in the paradox of the Middle East, where a technically large “middle class” has nonetheless failed to champion democracy. However, where the middle-class surge meets these two criteria, interesting political developments are sure to follow.

## NOTES

1. *The Economist* (February 14, 2009, pp. 3–4).
2. The first surge took place in the 19th century with the emergence of a middle class for the first time in Western Europe; the second surge took place between 1950 and 1980 with the expansion of the middle class, primarily in Western countries, during the postwar boom. (*Ibid.*)
3. This section draws heavily on the piece, “Who’s in the Middle?” *The Economist* (February 14, 2009, p. S4).
4. See, Milanovic and Yitzhaki (2002)
5. Aristotle actually referred to this ideal form of government as “polity” not democracy. According to Aristotle, the middle class possesses numerous features that foster such government: being neither rich nor poor the middle class can mediate between the two and defuse class hatred; the middle class is the fount of moderation and tends to be more rational, rule-bound, and disposed to compromise than either the rich or poor; the middle class is neither domineering nor obsequious and as such is much more disposed to cooperation and working for the common good – the essential foundation of effective self-governance. Aristotle, *The Politics*.
6. See, Lipset (1959).
7. <http://pewglobal.org/middleclass/>
8. No doubt Lipset’s tendency to prize the political middle class as a force for moderation was also inspired by a reading of Aristotle. See footnote 6 above.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Note that the Pew study (which documented greater appreciation of democratic values in the rising middle class) defined middle class as people earning just under \$12 a day, that is, people closer to the “Farell” definition of middle class.
11. For more elaboration see Bellin (2000).
12. *Ibid.*
13. Ravallion, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
14. Koshari is a favorite side dish in Egypt made of rice, lentils, and macaroni.
15. Ravallion, *op. cit.* p. 28.
16. See, for example, Eva Bellin (2004).
17. Interestingly, in his recent book Vali Nasr celebrates the rise of a new Muslim middle class which he believes will be a force for moderation and democracy in the Muslim world. But thus far Nasr locates this progressive middle class in only a few Muslim countries (e.g., Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia) where a sizable portion of the business community is integrated into the global economy and so, is “globally oriented.” Nasr concedes that in much of the Muslim world the business community is not well integrated into the global economy and the middle class is not an independent generator of wealth but rather remains dependent on the state. This is



not the middle class he is celebrating. *Forces of fortune: The rise of the new Muslim middle class and what it will mean for our world*. New York: Free Press, 2009.

18. See, for example, Shrobagy (2007), Ottaway and Hamzawy (2007).

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