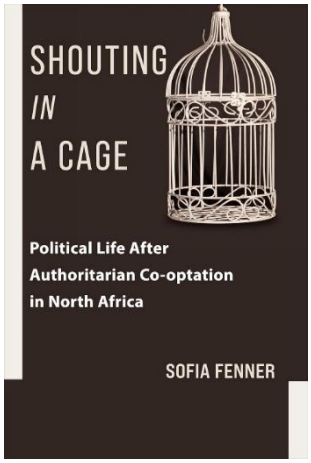


Sofia Fenner.- *Shouting in a Cage: Political life After Authoritarian Co-optation in North Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023) 280p.

In her *Shouting in a Cage: Political Life After Authoritarian Co-optation in North Africa,* Sofia Fenner emphasizes that co-optation which is central to authoritarian politics is unexplored and under-theorized, so her book is regarded as the first contribution which theorizes co-optation in the context of North Africa. In her extensive analysis – representing the culmination of over two years of thorough field research, which encompasses eighteen months conducted in Egypt from 2010 to 2014, in addition to an extra eleven months spent in Morocco from 2012 to 2019 – Fenner utilizes the historical backgrounds of the once-thriving nationalist parties in Egypt and Morocco to meticulously investigate the decline of the mass movements that played a vital role in achieving their nations' independence. She highlights the fact that these movements, which were once dynamic agents of change, have regrettably diminished into largely ineffective symbols weighed down by the demands of authoritarian regimes. Deprived of grassroots backing, these modern parties are frequently described as simply "yelling in a cage," with dominant perceptions indicating that they have been appropriated by authoritarian figures who provide material rewards in return for acquiescence. Nonetheless, Fenner persuasively contends that this narrative is not universally applicable; there exists limited credible evidence to support assertions of such inducements.

Co-optation undermines opposition movements, as transactional interpretations often carry greater persuasive power than alternative narratives. To grasp the underlying reasons, the author probes how co-opted entities articulate their own experiences of co-optation. In her book, Fenner concentrates on the experiences of two notable parties in North Africa: the Wafd Party in Egypt and the Istiqlal Party in Morocco. She posits that these parties are anchored in a "romantic narrative," perceiving themselves as bearers of hope for future democratic aspirations, while relying on a select few families to nurture successive generations of visionary thinkers. This perspective provides a sophisticated insight into the constrained opportunities for dissent within autocratic regimes, which are often organized around closely interconnected networks of familial and personal relationships. In this context, co-optation "neutralizes opposition not by limiting the actions or aspirations of incorporated groups – as dominant theories suggest – but by making those actions and aspirations ring hollow" (3).

For individuals who are familiar with the political environments of Egypt and Morocco, it is quite reasonable to scrutinize the author's decision to concentrate on two politically limited parties that display merely a slight resemblance to opposition. During the colonial period, the Wafd and Istiqlal emerged as powerful and well-structured nationalist movements. Both their supporters and detractors anticipated that these two parties would assume a leading position in the political arena after independence. Nevertheless, those expectations were ultimately unmet: the Wafd was disbanded by a newly formed military government, while Istiqlal was adeptly outmanoeuvred by a king. Aiming to operate within parliamentary systems, both parties unexpectedly found themselves opposing authoritarian regimes. Over time, both were integrated into formal political frameworks, resulting in a notable decrease in their significance and influence.

Fenner's book is divided into six chapters. Chapter One explores the histories of Istiqlal and the Wafd, with a specific focus on their post-independence developments. While scholars from Morocco, Egypt, and other countries have developed well-researched narratives detailing the beginnings of these political entities, such narratives frequently end with the departure of colonial forces. By extending the stories of both parties into contemporary times, Fenner provides historical perspectives that are predominantly absent in English, shedding light on crucial moments of political opportunity – situations where events might have unfurled differently. Furthermore, the author presents a new classification of opposition parties functioning within authoritarian systems and specify her emphasis on what she refers to as "holdover" parties. In comparison to challenger and palace parties, holdover parties were "created by non- regime actors prior to the onset of incumbent authoritarian rule" (50).

In Chapter Two, Fenner reveals the two facets of co-optation – incorporation and neutralization – and emphasizes the need for a renewed emphasis on the incorporative aspect. It is crucial to understand that co-optation is not automatically successful; those who are co-opted may exhibit both compliance and resistance. Therefore, the author states that we ought to characterize co-optation as the process of assimilating adversaries into official regime frameworks while maintaining neutrality concerning any possible results. Consequently, she contends that the essence of co-optation lies in empirical investigation rather than merely in definitional terms.

Chapter Three explores the evolution of Istiqlal's "democratic journey," a poignant narrative characterized by trials, tribulations, and ultimate redemption that shaped the party's discourse for over three decades. This "democratic journey" sought to harmonize contemporary co-optation

with aspirations for a democratic future; however, it struggled to contend with transactional counter-narratives.

Chapter Four uncovers similar dynamics present in Wafdist discourse. Although the Wafd favored martial metaphors rather than journey narratives, the structural resemblances between the narratives of the two parties fulfilled similar political roles. In contrast to dominant theories that propose parties fall prey to co-optation when they lose confidence in their capacity to bring about systemic change, she illustrates that the discourse of both parties remained imbued with optimism, both during the period of co-optation and for many subsequent years. Additionally, Fenner elucidates the reasons why Romantic narratives often perform less effectively compared to their transactional counterparts and record the increasing isolation faced by both parties.

In Chapter Five, the author analyzes the influence of the "party as family" concept on interactions within political parties. Although both parties are closely linked to actual family networks, metaphorical kinship also binds members who may not share blood relations. The standards that dictate suitable party conduct are shaped by familial principles, including the idea of "familial connectivity," initially proposed by Suad Joseph. This idea suggests that family members are not simply separate individuals but rather extensions of one another, delineating three primary ways in which these familial norms protect opposition in authoritarian settings: by establishing valuable political space, aiding recruitment in the face of repression, and preventing fragmentation.

Chapter Six delves deeper into the intricate interplay between these dynamics and generational shifts, resulting in notable political reversals. Transactional theories often fall short in explaining why political parties might, metaphorically, "bite the hands that feed them" (12); nonetheless, both Istiqlal and the Wafd parties have recently illustrated this phenomenon. In 2011, the Wafd actively participated in protests against Hosni Mubarak's regime, while Istiqlal made a bold move by withdrawing from the cabinet in 2013. The imperatives of generational recruitment and unity indicate that co-opted parties are continuously affected by internal divisions, with emerging constituencies and perspectives ready to assert their influence when the balance of power changes. The "party as family" framework accommodates these differences, normalizing them in a way that safeguards intraparty dissent and encourages healthy competition.

Sofia Fenner's *Shouting in a Cage* invites a reflective examination of the implications of her analysis for both activists and scholars. Her central argument posits that co-optation operates through discursive dynamics; it is not the benefits conferred that undermine opposition, but rather the

interpretations that are disseminated. Academics involved in this discussion are not simply passive spectators; they actively engage in the processes they examine, thus playing a role in the occurrence of co-optation. When we characterize opposition parties as duplicitous sellouts, we are not merely observing their neutralization; rather, we are, in reality, reinforcing it.

Drawing upon extensive archival and ethnographic investigations conducted in Egypt and Morocco, Sofia Fenner's research presents a compelling and alternative viewpoint. She elucidates how the harsh realities of existence under dictatorship compel previously autonomous political parties to prioritize their survival over efforts to gain widespread support.

Lahoucine Aammari
Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Dhar El Mahraz,
Fes, Morocco