

## Conceptual Reflections on Boycott: Understanding and Interpreting Boycotts in the Arab World

Michael Schmidmayr\*

**Abstract:** *Over the past decades, the Arab polities have witnessed some degree of political opening and the enhancement, the reactivation or the mere creation formal political institutions. This clearly forms part of the incumbents' endeavour to stabilise their authoritarian power through re-legitimization patterns. While many political activists—both from the regime-loyal and the opposition side—have been tempted to play by the new rules, others occasionally decide to stay away from that new formal arena of political engagement, preferring to concentrate on alternative patterns. However, rather than a mere black-and-white picture, political activity can also oscillate between formal and informal mechanisms, partly accepting the system's rules while rejecting some other elements. A specific tool used in this middle-course strategy is the device of boycott, which has been amply used in Middle Eastern polities in the past. Boycott both addresses the incumbents and the boycotters' constituencies and potential supporters. While it is certainly used as a tool of political bargaining with the incumbents, it also serves the purpose of upholding support from constituencies and international actors. Despite the amplitude of the phenomenon, however, literature on boycott within authoritarian regimes remains slender; the present study therefore seeks to add some conceptual reflections. This is attempted by conceptualizing the rationales involved and deepening our understanding of what motivates opposition activists to boycott elections, but also by categorizing the different forms of boycott.*

**Key words:** Boycott, Arab World, parliamentary boycotts, election boycotts, informal politics

---

\* Associate Director for International Relations, SciencesPo, Nancy, France, michael.schmidmayr@sciences-po.fr

## Introduction

With increasing possibilities of participation even in authoritarian settings, there are more opportunities for boycott as well. In conformity with this idea, the number of boycotts in the Arab world is on the rise. Interestingly enough, literature on the phenomenon of election boycotts worldwide and a fortiori in the Arab world is far from abundant.<sup>1</sup>

The first reflex when approaching election boycott is to check on the general concept of boycott, as boycotted elections seem to be more recent than other forms of boycott, which was a business practice in the first place. There is some literature on boycott, but which focuses on forms of boycott other than election boycott.<sup>2</sup> There are some scholars, however, who have addressed election boycotts, most prominently Lindberg as well as Beaulieu and Beaulieu and Hyde.<sup>3</sup> But while they occasionally cover the Arab world, their studies either have a global or a different regional focus. In studies on Arab political systems mostly on Arab authoritarianism election boycott is surprisingly absent, except for case studies on specific countries. Pripstein Posusney has advanced some conceptual remarks but not dealt with the phenomenon more extensively. As a general impression, we might contend that boycotts are mentioned in scientific literature on quite some occasions, but only rarely discussed as such.<sup>4</sup>

It therefore seems to be useful to analyze the reasons that make opponents boycott elections rather than participate, in spite of the consequences they eventually have to cope with. To do so, a useful definition will be required; and the attempts to obtain such a definition will show that coming up with a clear definition of election boycott is all but easy. To be sure, on most occasions it is quite clear whether an election has suffered boycott or not; but there are some tricky cases that cannot be clarified right away. Maybe our addressing the issue can help make headway towards a useful concept.

As a preliminary definition, we might say that election boycott occurs when political actors that could have participated had they wanted, deliberately stay away from a specific election. As we will see this definition does not resolve all the problems; but it gives us an impression of what we are actually dealing with. As we shall look at numbers and cases, we must also define our analytical framework. First, we will limit ourselves to national-level boycotts, there are a couple of municipal election boycotts as well, such as the June 1990 municipal elections in Tunisia, which were boycotted by the opposition.<sup>5</sup> Second, we have to define our regional scope: here, we have decided to deal with all Arab League member states except those which have no territorial contiguity with the majority of Arab countries, i. e. Somalia, Djibouti, and the Comoros. This leaves us with 19 countries including the Palestinian Authority. We will assume here that they are all authoritarian in the sense of Juan Linz's analysis.<sup>6</sup>

In order to deal with boycotts in the Arab world, we shall take a look at the number of boycotts there in relation to other regions, and draw some preliminary assumptions from this. At a further stage, it is worth attempting to conceptualize boycott, which has received rather limited attention hitherto. At last, we will also look at the rationales that motivate both boycotters and incumbents. This will hopefully allow us to address the major questions related to boycott, which are why and when it occurs.

Empirical Observations on Election Boycotts: Comparing Boycotts in the Arab States and in the World<sup>7</sup>

A quick look at the comprehensive dataset compiled by Binghamton University, which comprises 1380 national-level electoral occurrences in the world between 1971 and 2005, reveals that there were 143 elections that were concerned by boycott, which yields a ratio of 10.4 percent. On the other hand, by extracting electoral occurrences in the Arab world, the overall ratio virtually doubles to 21.6 percent, with 25 out of 116 elections boycotted in the same period. For a better understanding of the underlying dynamics, one might note that for the entire period, none of the 26 elections in the U.S. or Canada is reported to have been boycotted. Likewise, the European example also shows a rather low tendency toward boycott. Looking at compiled data of European states (excluding from this the Soviet Union and the newly independent states after 1991), only 13 out of 296 elections were

boycotted there (4.4 percent). Curiously, considering only those elections which took place under a democratic regime (which means erasing data prior to the Eastern European democratic transition process, but also from the Spanish and Portuguese authoritarian periods in the 1970s), the percentage of boycotted elections slightly rises to 4.5 percent (13 out of 289) the data does not show any boycotted election in the pre-transition period in these countries. It is striking that most electoral boycotts (numbering 8) are reported for the rather specific case of Cyprus, where the Turkish Cypriots' defection from joint institutions since 1964 is considered a case of boycott.<sup>8</sup> Further adapting the data by leaving Cyprus apart leads to the rather low percentage of 1.8 percent of boycotted elections (5 out of 276).

**Table 1:** Percentage of boycotted elections 1971-2005

	Number of elections	Number of boycotted elections	Percentage of boycotted elections
World	1380	143	10.4%
U.S. and Canada	26	0	0%
Europe, adjusted	276	5	1.8%
Arab states	116	25	21.6%

It is not this paper's endeavor to check on which region of the world is mostly affected by the phenomenon of election boycott, but boycott is more common in the Arab world than in Western states. One explanation could be found in cultural elements; but it might be more convincing to check on the incidence of the regime type, and formulate the hypothesis that authoritarian regimes are more likely to incite political actors to boycott than are democratic systems.

### Data on Arab Election Boycotts

To study the phenomenon of boycott in the Arab world in further detail, the Binghamton University dataset, which was conceived for quantitative analysis, does not provide enough information. I therefore had to establish my own dataset, which partly draws on Binghamton's information but completes it with other sources. Also, I have chosen to analyze a different period, which stretches from 1980 to 2010.<sup>9</sup> The new table shows 36 occurrences of electoral boycott in Arab states between 1980 and 2010. There are periods with a low number of boycotts, such as the 1990s, and the table suggests a tendency towards more boycotts. There, too, we can draw an assumption, which is that opponents to the incumbents more often resort to boycott because they increasingly see reasons to do so, mostly linked to the likelihood of success but also other elements, which will be elaborated upon later.

**Table 2:** Boycotts in Arab states, 1980-2010 (sorted by year)

Year	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Σ
Number of Boycotts	0	1	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	3	3	1	2	2	0	3	1	2	3	0	2	0	2	5	36

Another table shows the geographical distribution of the boycotts that occurred in the analyzed period:

**Table 3:** Boycotts in Arab states, 1980-2010 (sorted by country)

Country	Algeria	Bahrain	Egypt	Iraq	Jordan	Kuwait	Lebanon	Morocco	Palestine	Sudan	Syria	Tunisia	Yemen
Boycotts	6	2	8	2	2	1	3	1	3	2	1	3	2

Egypt and Algeria clearly appear as the 'champions' of boycott. In fact, the North African states have the lion's share in boycotted elections (20 boycotts). The six Gulf Cooperation Council member states, on the other hand, are only marginally affected by the phenomenon of boycott, but there is a simple explanation to this: some Gulf states have not organized national elections at all (such as Saudi-Arabia or Qatar), others have a rather short-lived tradition of elections (such as the United Arab Emirates) or have at least experienced longer periods without elections being called (such as Bahrain). Yet there is also another interpretation: highly illiberal authoritarian systems such as Iraq under Saddam Husayn or Syria under Hafiz al-Asad did not constitute the most welcoming playground for boycotters, who would fear limited chances of success, let alone heavy-handed sanctions imposed upon opponents. This suggests that there might be a certain type of authoritarian regime which encourages boycott. Indeed, there seems to be a correlation between the regimes' and the incumbents' quest for legitimacy on the one hand, and the likelihood of boycott on the other hand.

### Conceptualizing and Analyzing Electoral Boycott: What is boycott?

Having gained a very first impression and a very superficial one of the occurrences of election boycott in the Arab world, we need to enrich our comprehension of what boycott actually is. Historically, boycott was not used in elections but in business: the very first boycott which explicitly bore that name occurred in 19th-century Ireland then under English rule, when Irish villagers stood up against an absentee English landlord's agent, Charles Cunningham Boycott. The villagers' strategy of ostracizing Charles Boycott (and 'boycotting' him by refraining from doing business with him) was so successful that the name became a general term for quite some different kinds of non-cooperative acts, and covered different phenomena ranging from business boycott, election boycott to academic boycotts.<sup>10</sup> The rationale followed was to commercially marginalize Charles Boycott, even at (initially) higher costs for the 'boycotters'.

It is worth noting that boycott originally described business practices rather than electoral ones. Election boycott is one specific kind of boycott that has gained increasing prominence and seems to be a rather recent phenomenon, maybe because it involves the question of regime legitimacy, whose importance has significantly increased in the world since the 20th century. Business boycotts, on the other hand, are older than the term 'boycott' itself. As an example, one might cite the American colonists' commercial boycotts of English goods in the framework of the American struggle for independence in the 1760s and 1770s. Other boycotts include the Iranian Tobacco Boycott of 1890, and, as one of the most prominent, and also the most despised ones, the Nazis' boycott of Jewish businesses in Germany in 1933. On the other hand, Mahatma Gandhi's Salt Tax Boycott in 1930 India and the Black American civil rights movement's Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 bear a much more positive image today. In all cases, it was the consumers that opted for concerted action.<sup>11</sup> Other kinds of boycott have emerged as well, such as the school boycotts in South Africa under Apartheid rule, the notorious 1980 and 1984 Olympic boycotts or the academic boycott targeting Israeli universities and scholars.

Election boycott has gained prominence with the multiplication of elections in the world,<sup>12</sup> but also with the growing importance of modern concepts of political legitimacy: charismatic and traditional legitimacy types are increasingly replaced by rational legitimacy. The fact that even authoritarian incumbents more often than before resort to elections (whether manipulated or not) shows that they, too, need to re-legitimize their rule through legalistic mechanisms. This has automatically increased both the very opportunity of boycott (for election boycott to take place there needs to be an election) and the leverage boycotters could realistically hope to exercise.

### **Decrypting Election Boycott: a Tentative Definition**

While election boycott can be considered a specific kind of non-participation (it is indeed organized non-participation, and usually exceeds the simple aggregate act of not voting), not all elections that produce low voter turnouts can be considered boycotted. This indicates that before dealing with election boycott, we need to clarify our understanding of what election boycott actually is. At a first stage, these observations can be applied generally and need not to be limited to the case of Arab authoritarian regimes.

Empirically, there are different kinds of occurrences that are usually tagged as election boycotts. The perfect type of election boycott and the one we would most probably come up with spontaneously when being confronted with the term is the case of a group of political actors (generally hailing from the opposition) calling for boycott once the electoral date has been announced, at least some time (but which can be reduced to some hours) ahead of that date.<sup>13</sup>

A definition of election boycott needs to take into account a number of parameters in order to exclude other phenomena of non-participation such as simple abstentionism. The first observation here is that in order to be categorized as boycott, non-participation must be organized. If there is not a minimum degree of organization, the mere fact that some electors (and even a significant amount of them) decide not to go to the polls does not mean that elections are boycotted. Take the numerous examples from Egypt in the Mubarak era (from 1981 to early 2011) where participation often stalled at around 20-30 percent, which is incontestably low. One might interpret this phenomenon as unorganized mass disaffection with the incumbents, the regime, and the electoral system, which is perceived as flawed (either because of discriminatory parts of the electoral law or because of anticipated fraud). But as long as it is not organized, it cannot possibly be termed as boycott.

The second parameter is the question of significance. Unless there are significant actors that threaten to, and eventually carry out their call for non-participation, there is no boycott. The question of significance, however, is a tricky one. Quantity can be but is not always a very telling element. To be sure, in most cases quantity does matter, as boycott will only happen if it is organized by a significant amount of political actors. However, an election could also be boycotted by one single actor, on the condition that he/she/they have enough power or influence over the population to turn unorganized disaffection with the regime and the incumbents into organized defection. Significant actors need not necessarily to be politicians; they can hail from para-political backgrounds as well (such as trade unions or civil society, non-governmental, organizations).

Third, no election boycott can and will happen if not accompanied by a variety of measures, mostly in terms of communication. Logically, if nobody openly calls on citizens to boycott, the latter will not even be aware of the opportunity. Therefore, in order to be successful, boycott calls have to be relayed by the media or through alternative channels (the Internet might become a more powerful instrument here) and must receive at least some echo in society. Aware of this, boycotters will most likely build up a comprehensive communication strategy in order to increase their chances of success.

At last, the question of opportunities must be addressed as well. It is quite important to stress that only those actors can carry out boycott with credibility that could otherwise have participated in elections. An opposition group that has deliberately foregone the opportunity to partake in the political system, however flawed it might actually be, should not be considered a boycotter. This also means that when looking at elections presented as boycotted, we always need to check whether participation

could actually have happened had the non-participants only taken a different decision, or whether their participation was merely impossible from the beginning.

A banality that pertains to this observation is worth mentioning: election boycotts only appear in institutional settings that provide for such opportunities typically electoral occurrences (elections [municipal, legislative, presidential] or referenda). In regimes with no such opportunities no boycott actually occurs. Logically, boycotts can only be observed in countries that have organized elections; for instance, no boycott is reported here from Saudi Arabia as there has simply not been any such opportunity.<sup>14</sup>

These four points, however, are a mere description of the mechanisms only and ignore boycotters' intentions. At first glance there can be dozens of different motivations, but they can all be viewed as targeting either the incumbents or the system, and turning around one central element, which is legitimacy. In fact, boycotts delegitimize someone. The boycotters' message reads as follows: We do not partake in the electoral process because we do not want to confer legitimacy upon a regime/a government that we consider illegitimate or who have overstepped their legitimate competences. As mentioned above, this is probably one of the major reasons why in reality boycotts appear much more frequently in regimes that lack some degree of legitimacy democracies usually have a solid legitimacy basis, unlike many authoritarian regimes.

Therefore, a tentative (and possibly awkward) definition could read as follows: Election boycott occurs when significant political actors, who would have had the opportunity to participate in a poll, call on voters to spoil the electoral process by keeping away from ballot boxes, and accompany this call by devices of political communication, in order to delegitimize the regime, specific aspects thereof, or the incumbents.

### **Applying the Definition in Further Analysis**

The above definition will certainly cover the different boycotts in the Arab world. One must bear in mind, however, that there are quite some variables that are subject to interpretation. The major flaw of the definition is that it remains highly qualitative. To be sure, the 'opportunity' question is rather easy to verify; and the 'political communication' parameter is a discretionary provision: if boycotters do not resort to political communication, they certainly limit their chances to overcome, but this does not preclude the phenomenon from being tagged as boycott. This also holds true with regard to the 'organizedness' of boycotts.

The crucial parameter therefore remains the 'significant actors' problem, which can hardly be resolved. If there are significant actors, then boycott can occur; if there are not, non-participation remains mere abstentionism. The April 1999 presidential election in Algeria is a case where everything is clear: in a concerted action, six out of seven candidates withdrew their candidatures 24 hours prior to the vote, leaving Abdelaziz Bouteflika with no serious competitor.<sup>15</sup> Here, both the criteria of significance and number are met. Likewise, Iraqi legislative elections in January 2005 and March 2010 were boycotted by a significant number of political parties hailing from different strands of society.<sup>16</sup> In other cases, boycott calls by one single party can suffice as well, such as Jordanian legislative elections in November 1997 and November 2010 or Moroccan legislative elections in September 2002, which were both boycotted by the respective country's major Islamist force.<sup>17</sup> But there are cases where the question of significance becomes much more difficult to answer, as in the 2006 and 2010 legislative elections in Bahrain. While the 2002 elections were incontestably boycotted by an alliance of four major opposition groups, the situation was quite different on the subsequent occasions. In 2006, no registered political society called for boycott, although one of the four former boycotters, the Islamic Action Society (IAS), decided not to field candidates. Boycott calls were waged by non-registered actors such as the Haqq Movement, an offshoot of the major Shi'i Islamist political society *al-Wifaq* (the latter, the main force of the former boycott alliance, ran in the election and won a large share of seats). On the other hand, the IAS openly associated with Haqq and other forces from outside the recognized political spectrum again in 2010 to call for boycott of the new

legislative election. While there are some similarities between the 2006 and the 2010 calls for boycott, only the 2010 boycott will be counted here as it was the only one of the two occurrences which involved also a political group that could have participated in the election (an indispensable criterion, cf. above).

Yet this demonstrates the difficulty of quantifying the term 'significant actors.' If, like in the Algerian case, there are just six (yet prominent) individuals calling for boycott, there can actually be boycott. Yet if there is only one force involved, this can be the case as well. Therefore, we cannot reasonably believe that fixing a threshold would make sense. For all those reasons, the criterion remains subject to qualitative interpretation.

| 26

When analyzing election boycotts, there is yet another parameter which needs to be measured, i. e. the question of success. At the very first stage, boycott can be considered successful if it is followed widely. But only if there are also palpable consequences can we rightly evoke success, while we still have to be cautious about the causal links between different elements. Using the example of the Montgomery Bus Boycott pointed to above, this might be demonstrated more easily than with election boycotts: the first success of the boycott consisted in a large part of the black population of Montgomery refraining from riding on municipal buses. The second success could only materialize in the long run, with segregation becoming further delegitimized and local and national politicians being pressured into abolishing the entire system. Similar mechanisms can be assumed in the case of election boycotts.

The problem, however, once again consists in operationalizing the measurement of these two degrees of success. For the second one -long-term goals met or not- only profound policy analyses can identify the link between the boycott and the achievement of the boycotters' ultimate goals. There is yet another point that matters much more: the question of the boycott on the very day of election. Theoretically, in order to measure the impact of calls for boycott, one would have to compare elections without boycott to boycotted elections. *Ceteris paribus*, the difference in participation might then indicate how many people had actually observed the boycott. In practice, this is merely impossible.

If we rely on figures that are available, we have to compare participation figures in previous or subsequent elections with those of the boycotted election. Even if all data were reliable, there would still be few conclusions to be drawn from the comparison of the two or more figures, as elections only take place once in a while. Therefore we can reasonably assume that conditions (like the overall mood of the people) can change quite dramatically, and the *ceteris paribus* condition will certainly never be met.

But even if conditions were unchanged, the problem when dealing with elections in autocracies is also a lack of data reliability. In many cases, both the boycotters and 'the boycotted, i. e. the incumbents, come up with different figures when reporting on electoral participation. These figures can be quite divergent, such as in the case of the 1999 Algerian presidential election, where officials put the turnout at 60.9 percent, while opposition activists evoked a mere 25 percent.<sup>18</sup> In fact both sides have vested interest in showing that their calls for or against participation were followed, and consequently, opposition activist are quite likely to contest official figures and allege fraud even for this part of the results, let alone the ballot results themselves.

### **Developing a Typology of Boycotts**

Bearing in mind that our definition of boycotts cannot avoid argument as to whether a specific election was boycotted or not, but willing to make some headway here, we can try to set up a typology of boycotts. The above observations have shown clearly that all boycotts do share some key characteristics but they differ on many other points. When looking at boycotts, at least two categorizations can be used which, combined, yield some ideal types.

The first distinction is related to the scope of the boycott. In her analysis of election boycotts, Emily Beaulieu distinguishes major and minor boycotts.<sup>19</sup> The latter usually serve particularistic

agendas of one specific group, while the former voice more general grievances (often system-related) and are carried out either by a major group of the polity or even by an alliance of different actors. There are few examples of minor boycotts, but Beaulieu points to Lebanese parliamentary elections that were boycotted by Christian parties, probably referring to the 1996 legislative election, which was boycotted by Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM). While it is always hard to tell whether the boycotters' agenda was rather particularistic or of general interest (the boycotters' rhetoric would of course state the latter), there is no doubt that the FPM was far from being a major political party in terms of numbers. With other Christian politicians opposing the calls for boycott and running in the election, the boycott can reasonably be termed as 'minor.'

Examples of major boycotts include legislative elections in Jordan in 1997 and in 2010, both boycotted by the major opposition party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), or the 2002 Bahrain legislative election in 2002, where a four-party alliance emerged that was composed of two Shi'i Islamist and of two non-Islamist ('secular') groups. We might legitimately assume that almost any case of cross-ideological boycott alliance is a major boycott, as it includes multiple strands of society. With regard to minor boycotts, we might think of the 2010 boycott of Bahrain's legislative elections, where one single registered political society deliberately decided not to run, and was supported in this by the Haqq Movement standing outside the authorized political spectrum.

Beaulieu also draws a line between peaceful boycotts, 'Gandhian boycotts' and those ready to use violence or even deliberately resorting to violence as a political instrument 'Fearonian boycotts'.<sup>20</sup> While the distinction can be useful, it will be discarded hereinafter. In fact, it seems like most boycotts in Arab countries have been rather Gandhi-style, even if violence might of course have occurred occasionally.

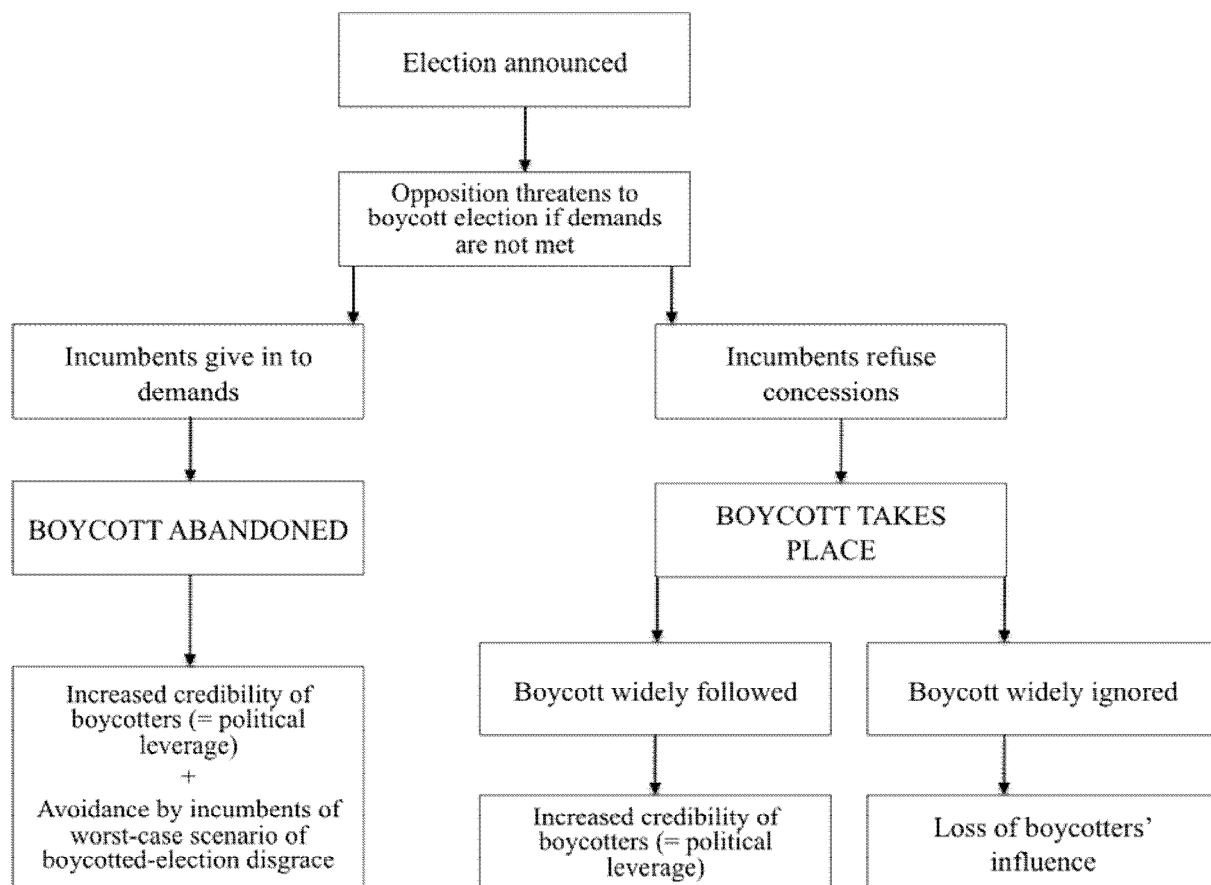
A more promising element of distinction is related to the process of the boycott and the evaluation of its outcome. When looking at boycotts, there are different stages that they typically go through, as well as different trajectories that can be taken. In general, a boycott starts once an official date for election has been announced. The boycotters usually start voicing their requests and threaten to defect from the vote in case their demands are not met by the incumbents. There are no limits to imagination regarding the grievances invoked by boycotters, but on most occasions demands are system-related: the opponents refuse to take part in elections unless either the very system or at the least the electoral law is changed. Yet they can also simply protest expected manipulation of the election and its results by the incumbents. In theory, policy issues can be at stake as well, but in the dataset on Arab boycotts over the past 30 years no such occurrence has presumably arisen.

Once demands have been expressed and the boycott threat, issued, there are two possible results: if the incumbents react by giving in to the demands of the boycotters, the latter can decide to cancel the boycott. Our dataset reports one such occasion: in 2009, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), a cross-ideological platform of opposition parties to president Ali Abdullah Salih's General People's Congress, threatened not to participate in the announced legislative election as long as the issue of voter registration was not resolved. They called for postponement of the election to clarify that question first. Surprisingly or not, the incumbents decided to give in rather than face huge abstentionism in case boycott was carried out.<sup>21</sup>

All other records in our data stem from elections that were effectively boycotted. This makes the Yemeni case a rather singular one, although we cannot be entirely sure that there were not other occasions with an initial boycott threat eventually abandoned before the scheduled date of the election. There might indeed be minor occurrences of that nature. The Yemeni case, however, probably remains the only major boycott case within this category.<sup>22</sup>

In case the incumbents do not give in or only partially give in to the opposition's demands, the latter usually maintain their calls on the population to boycott the vote. There are two possible scenarios here: if abstention is massive, the boycott can be considered successful (but we have already invoked the problem of measuring this kind of success). On the contrary, if there is no significantly lower turnout than usual, the boycott can be viewed as failed. In either one of these two scenarios, there is one winner and one loser, as this seems to be a zero-sum game. A very specific case can be observed as well, with no clear assessment possible as to who finally prevails in the contest.



**Table 4:** Typical trajectories/stages of boycotts

With regard to 'second-degree successes,' it is hard to observe any success that exceeds the simple massive participation or non-participation in an election. In theory, ultimate success of a boycott would be that the incumbents eventually give in to the boycotters' demands following the boycott, while failure would translate into the preservation of the status quo. Yet from the different cases studied here, we can deduct that even in case of massive abstention by the population, boycotts have only exceptionally compelled the incumbents to make any such concessions.<sup>23</sup> Still, what can be observed frequently is a further erosion of the authoritarian regime's and/or the incumbents' legitimacy in the eyes of the population and not to be neglected of the international community. It cannot be excluded that this legitimacy problem puts additional pressure on the incumbents and eventually modifies their attitudes, engendering some steps in the long run that are conform with the boycotters' initial demands. For instance, one might assume that the long-lasting boycott of Palestinian elections by Hamas (legislative and presidential elections in January 1996, presidential election in 2005) had been a major threat to the Palestinian Authority's legitimacy, and could arguably have led to some concessions by the ruling Fatah faction towards Hamas. Beyond a change in Hamas's very strategy, some kind of dialogue could actually have emerged between Fatah and Hamas, which might have encouraged the latter to participate in the January 2006 legislative election, which resulted in Hamas's massive sweep of the votes.

To be sure, back in 1996 (and until 2005), there was no way for compromise between Hamas and Fatah, as the latter maintained their maximalist approach towards the Palestine liberation issue. The boycott was a challenge for the entire Oslo Accords framework and the Palestinian Authority, and it was virtually impossible for Fatah to give in to any substantial Hamas demand. Only when Hamas modified their proper stance could participation be envisaged.

Most other cases, however, provide some maneuvering space to the incumbents, who are free to take or leave it. For instance, the Bahraini legislative election in 2002, which suffered from quite some degree of non-participation (turnout at 53.4 percent even according to official sources), jeopardized the legitimacy of King Hamad's rule. After the boycott had taken place, he could actually have addressed some of the boycotters' demands, but in reality he rather opted for ignoring them. While this stance seems to have been more or less successful (it eventually compelled the majority of boycotters to rethink their strategy and run in the 2006 election), it also bore some risks, including the legitimacy issue. In fact, the opposition made some efforts to keep the memory of the boycott alive and reiterate their demands for constitutional reform. This also hints at the need for political communication beyond election day. The facts and subsequent developments also suggest that the boycotters' determination and means were not sufficient to outweigh the incumbents' waiting-out strategy.

Combining the different categories and applying them to our observations on Arab boycotts, several ideal types emerge: the first one is the case of minor boycott, which produces no positive result for the boycotters, as they happen to be further marginalized. While their boycott might also contribute to the erosion of the system's legitimacy, they cannot realistically hope to obtain any major victory, as observed in the Lebanese elections in 1996.

The second type is the major boycott which produces positive results even before election day. It can be observed on one occasion over the past 30 years, i. e. in the Yemeni legislative election scheduled for 2009. There, the incumbents preferred giving in the opposition's demands rather than facing the scenario of a widely boycotted election.

The third type would be elections effectively boycotted by major opposition forces but with no palpable outcome at the ballot box, such as observed in the first Palestinian elections. While Hamas had actively called for boycott, the electors massively went to the polls, yielding the rather high participation figure of 71.66 percent in the presidential and legislative election of 1996.<sup>24</sup>

At last, the fourth type and, by the way, the most positive scenario for boycotters, besides the second type would be the case of major boycott that is effectively followed by voters, yielding massive abstentionism. Egyptian elections have frequently 'suffered' from this phenomenon, such as the December 2010 legislative election, where turnout might have been as low as 10-15 percent, according to opposition sources.<sup>25</sup> While this did not hinder the incumbent National Democratic Party from winning a huge majority of the vote (but allegedly through massive fraud), it further alienated the population, and as later developments showed, the December 2010 vote might have been one of the straws that broke the camel's neck. In the case of the 1990 legislative election boycott in Kuwait, turnout was much higher (62 percent) but comparatively low with regard to precedent and following elections, where it was regularly above 80 percent. In the Kuwaiti case, a majority of political forces had decided not to run in order to protest against a new systemic configuration that limited the elected parliament's rights. The results eventually forced the Amir to reconsider his attitude and reinstate the National Assembly that had been suspended since 1986.<sup>26</sup>

### **Why, and when, boycott at all?**

We can assume here that boycotts are only carried out if there are sufficient stakes involved for both contenders and incumbents (and maybe electors as well). But these stakes are multiple, and while some are presented popularly, there can also be hidden agendas. The stake for the incumbents is certainly the most apparent one: successful boycott always puts into the question either the incumbents' and/or the very system's legitimacy. Consequently, the incumbents will always try to avoid any humiliation stemming from a call for boycott widely followed by the population. On the other side, if they successfully foil attempts of boycott they can discredit their adversaries. In fact, calls for boycott which are not followed by voters will certainly cast some doubts on the boycotters' influence with the people, a message which can be exploited politically in the aftermath of elections.

Furthermore, if the people massively go to the polls even in the presence of a boycott call, this might even more positively be interpreted as a sign of support for the incumbents.

Therefore, boycotters have to carefully analyze their strengths and weaknesses. They must find out which leverage they have over the population, and also take into account the consequences both of successful and failed boycott. For instance, successful boycott can alter the incumbents' strategies towards the opposition, possibly resulting in unwanted, heavy-handed, responses by the government towards their challengers.

| 30

For opponents, there are of course a couple of reasons that might make boycott worth considering. In the first place, we must recall that the institutional settings are usually such that only limited maneuvering spaces do exist for the opposition. This means they cannot realistically hope to gain power through elections under the existing conditions: in authoritarianism, while elections can take place, the real decision-making takes place outside the parliamentary avenue. Authoritarian regimes' parliaments lack the power of holding the executive accountable, and seldom are governments subject to the parliament's approval. In theory, some degree of accountability may exist, such as the possibility to question or even remove ministers, but in reality these possibilities are rather limited. Also, authoritarian incumbents have quite a few means of manipulation at their disposal, limiting both the opposition's chance to win majorities in elections, either because the electoral system is precisely tailored to foreclose this very scenario, or because incumbents can (and do) resort to multiple acts of manipulation to avoid such outcomes.

The first objective of boycott therefore seems avoiding to confer the system and the incumbents the legitimacy they seek unless concessions are obtained. Most Arab authoritarians today, before and after the Arab Spring, are trying to legitimize or re-legitimize their rule. With the decreasing role played by charismatic and traditional legitimacy patterns and the increasing importance of rational/legal legitimacy, elections have gained prominence. Only some marginal examples do exist where there are still no elections on the national level (Saudi Arabia and, so far, Qatar). As both constituents and the international community have increasingly focused on elections as a basis of legitimization, there are also more opportunities for the political actors of the opposition.

Arab opposition activists seem aware of the different political and electoral systems' shortcomings, but also the role elections play for the incumbents. This confers them some maneuvering space when bargaining with their respective governments. In this sense, they will consider resorting to boycott if they can realistically hope to obtain some concessions on policy and possibly systemic issues.

As Schmidmayr shows in his study, the decision for boycott is based on rationales at two different levels, the first one being an avoidance strategy, while the second one really touches upon policy or systemic objectives.<sup>27</sup> With regard to the former, boycott avoids conferring a system or the incumbents legitimacy they do not merit. Opposition activists usually openly point to systemic shortcomings or policy grievances; if they threaten to (and ultimately carry out) boycott they emphasize such legitimacy deficiencies. Yet boycotters can also have hidden agendas pertaining to avoidance, mostly to circumvent the threat of electoral defeat. In fact, there are quite some cases where opposition activists themselves are rather reluctant to play the electoral game as they might face defeat: elections could well demonstrate their inability to mobilize parts of the population. This rationale will not be found with mass integration parties but rather with small, elitist groups without a popular basis.<sup>28</sup> The smaller the latter's chances to 'survive' in elections, the more keen reluctant they might be to submit their popularity to the risky business of the ballot. This of course suggests that boycotters are rational actors, but there are no elements that prove the opposite. In this sense, it also seems natural that they all follow their own agendas. While the question of legitimacy is the one generally invoked, other objectives might be voiced as well. Here, too, openly advocated and hidden goals can be distinguished. Legitimacy pertains to the former, with 'noble' objectives such as a fair election system or real powers for parliament. Concerning the non-avowed endeavors, it is mostly about power. Even in authoritarian regimes, power politics do of course exist, even though opposition activists might not realistically hope to replace the incumbents on top of the state. But they can try and increase their influence and obtain concessions on specific issues, which can eventually translate both

in material and immaterial terms. When boycott is interpreted under these auspices, it becomes a normal political device in the framework of political bargaining. While the public interest can of course play a role here, more particularistic agendas might be involved as well.

What is important with regard to admitted and non-admitted objectives is that it is in the interest of political groups to voice those demands that can be positively received with the population and, quite often, the international community. Therefore, analyzing boycotts (and more specifically the rhetoric of boycotters) it is crucial both to look at what is truly called for and what these calls might in fact dissimulate. As an example, one can cite Islamists, who more than often call for democratic elections (supposing they can possibly win the ballot) but might actually have other ideas up their sleeves as well, such as simply changing current 'secular' autocracies to Islamic ones.<sup>29</sup>

Turning back to the incumbents' perspectives, there are different strategies when faced with the threat of boycott. The least likely one is the simple acceptance of the boycotters' demands even before the electoral contest. But as has been pointed to above, the Yemeni example of 2009 might be an exception but is therefore all the more worth mentioning. In that case, the government probably expected massive popular defection from the ballot. Unwilling to give the opposition a chance to demonstrate their strength on the occasion of an election, they preferred the lesser evil of honoring the opposition's demands, which simply consisted in postponing the election pending the resolution of the voter registration issue. On other occasions, the incumbents ventured to avoid the disgrace of a boycotted election by giving in to some minor demands, as happened in Bahrain in 2002. But in that case, the four boycotting groups, aware of their strength and popularity, maintained the boycott calls unless all their demands were met (which they were not, and the consequence was the boycott of the election).

Mostly, Arab incumbents seem to play rather for time and wait out the boycotters, and occasionally combine this with countermeasures. The governments can try, and curb the boycotters' actions. They can disturb meetings or arrest key figures of the boycotters' movement. The idea there is to limit both the boycotters' maneuvering space and possibly discredit their claims by demonstrating the limited scope of the boycott calls. They can also try to break up the alliance of opposition parties or associations by trying to buy out some particular actors. The rationale here is what Marsha Pripstein Posusney identifies as a prisoner dilemma of the boycotters only when they cooperate can they realistically hope for their calls to be followed. As she contends, "[w]hile each would benefit from the embarrassment to incumbent elites if all join the boycott, if one party defects it then gains sole access to whatever benefits in terms of media attention and/or rewards from the regime for participation come from being the opposition presence in parliament."<sup>30</sup>

Aware of this, incumbents can both try and convince some boycotters to defect from the call (through incentives, or by demonstrating them the benefit of winning all opposition votes) and impose heavy sanctions on those who keep calling for boycott. But this happens with different intensities. In the widely-cited 2002 Bahraini case, the government deployed massive means both to fight back before the election and to mobilize the population on Election Day. The result only partly reflected their endeavor, since little more than half of the population participated in the ballot. But it is not excluded that they managed to avoid an even more obvious disgrace.

Other rulers seem to have been much lesser engaged in fighting the boycott. Over the past years, the Egyptian government deployed few means to fight the boycott itself. This can be interpreted as a certain degree of disillusion. Aware that the Egyptian people, with or without boycott, massively stay home on election days, they could have estimated that the stakes of boycott were much lower. It is true that if turnout on normal occasions oscillates around 25 percent, a 20 percent participation is not such a clear sign of a boycott call's success after all. Instead, the Egyptian government rather focused on securing the vote, i. e. producing at least the desired, pro-government or pro-ruling party, results.

## Conclusion

As our observations have shown, there are some different scenarios possible in boycotted elections in Arab countries. Also, quite a few elements act as determinants of the behavior of both boycotters and the boycotted, and influence the processes and outcome. Among others, key elements involve legitimacy, credibility, size and quality of contestation.

| 32

At last, another element that has not been studied here deserves some attention. Beaulieu and Hyde point to the role of international observers in elections, and demonstrate empirically how the presence of international observers actually increases the likelihood of boycott.<sup>31</sup> The reasons are obvious: as long as little international attention is paid to election results, the only addressee of election boycotts is the national population. Once that equation changes, all of a sudden there are additional incentives to point to the shortcomings of the system rather than caution it through participation. It might be worth checking on these assumptions by confronting the different boycott records, although there is the intuition that the presence of international observers is generally very much frowned upon in Arab autocracies, and therefore results might be limited. What is true, however, is that rising international public and media interest for events in Arab states, possibly viewed through prisms such as good governance, human rights, or the rule of law, could possibly have had an effect on the number of boycotts in the Arab world. When Western governments adopt such standards (such as the Bush Administration did in the aftermath of 9/11), the number might rise even further.

On all accounts, boycott has become a rather 'popular' device in Arab politics over the past years. As a matter of fact, it increasingly not only appears in elections but also in other political contexts. For instance, there are frequent occurrences of post-election boycotts, where elected representatives hailing from the opposition withdraw from the framework they had implicitly acknowledged by their participation in elections. This withdrawal (or boycott) can be either temporary; or it can be long-lasting and the manifestation of a new opposition stance towards the incumbents and the system.

In Bahrain, Yemen, or Kuwait, there is quite some tradition of parliament sessions boycotted by elected MPs. These acts of non-cooperation are mostly linked to particular, one-shot grievances. For instance, after the former boycotters of al-Wifaq had taken part in legislative elections in 2006 (and immediately became the largest, though not majority, faction in parliament), they still heavily drew on the ideas of boycott as a means to show their disapproval with specific acts of the executive or fellow MPs. Dissatisfied with the election of the parliament's speaker (designated by all other factions against al-Wifaq, while al-Wifaq contended the speaker should hail from the biggest faction), or protesting the allegedly unjust distribution of seats in the different parliamentary commissions, they kept away from parliamentary meetings from the beginning. On other occasions, they would protest specific policy issues and only return to parliament after several weeks. There, too, the rationale must have been to deny their fellow MPs the legitimacy the parliament so desperately needed (or so they thought).

But while they always returned to business as usual after some time, recent events in Bahrain hint at a different strategy, which might be a reversal of previous stances. At the end of February 2011, all 18 al-Wifaq MPs handed in their letters of resignation to protest the killing of peaceful demonstrators in the framework of the opposition's demonstrations for reforms.<sup>32</sup> While it is clear that this act of withdrawal is a sign of protest, it is hard to tell at the time of writing this paper whether there is a new boycott in the offing, or whether the MPs just sought to disengage from a system that they expected to collapse shortly.

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> I came across the phenomenon of election boycott when dealing with Bahrain. In fact, any scholar versed in modern-day Bahraini politics cannot avoid running into the boycotted elections scheme, and the 2002 legislative election, which was boycotted by an alliance of four opposition groups, is a prominently described element in

the country's more recent history. However, there seems not be any comprehensive study of boycott in the Arab world, in spite of the relative prominence of the phenomenon.

<sup>2</sup> e. g. Olivier Esteves, *Une histoire populaire du boycott, tome 1: 1880-1960: L'armée du nombre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Staffan I. Lindberg, "Tragic Protest: Why Do Opposition Parties Boycott Elections?," in: Andreas Schedler (ed.), *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder: L. Rienner, 2003), 203-268; Staffan I. Lindberg, "Opposition Parties and Democratisation in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 24(1)(2006), 123-138; Emily Beaulieu, *Protesting the Contest: Election Boycotts around the World, 1990-2002*. Ph.D thesis, University of California, San Diego (2006) and Emily Beaulieu and Susan D. Hyde, "In the Shadow of Democracy Promotion. Strategic Manipulation, International Observers, and Election Boycotts," *Comparative Political Studies* 20(10)(2008).

<sup>4</sup> Marsha Pripstein Posusney, "Multi-party elections in the Arab world: Institutional engineering and oppositional strategies," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 36(4)(2002), 34-62.

<sup>5</sup> "Le multipartisme d'État en Tunisie La débâcle," 2/12/2002, <http://astrubal.nawaat.org/2002/12/12/le-multipartisme-detat-en-tunisie-la-debacle> [accessed on 18 January 2011]

<sup>6</sup> We are quite well aware of the different subtypes of authoritarianism that other scholars have described. In the Arab world, certainly more than one single subtype is to be found. Yet at a preliminary stage the differences shall not be taken into account.

Juan Linz, "Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes," in: Fred Greenstein und Nelson Polsby (eds.), *Handbook of Political Science* (Reading: Addison Wesley, 1975), Vol. III, 175-411.

<sup>7</sup> Data available at <http://www2.binghamton.edu/political-science/institutions-and-elections-project.html>. The data do not include national-level referenda either, even though they can of course be boycotted. This is simply due to the impossibility to obtain any comprehensive dataset on all referenda in the Arab world since 1975.

<sup>8</sup> Other boycotts occurred in Macedonia, Romania, Albania and, rather surprisingly, Germany. Viewing the German 1998 legislative election as boycotted is rather curious and might be questioned, but this paper does not allow further enquiry into the reliability of the dataset used. It should be noted that the entire dataset has not been submitted to meticulous reviewing; the Arab states part, on the other hand, has, and has proven correct.

<sup>9</sup> Likewise, I have added data on Palestinian elections, which do not appear in the Binghamton dataset.

<sup>10</sup> It is quite ironic that it was the boycott's victim, Charles Boycott, who lent his name to the action that targeted him. Maybe even more interesting is the fact that it was the agent's name and not the landlords' one that became famous.

<sup>11</sup> Other such kinds of boycott are those against South African goods before the apartheid regime fell apart in 1991, the worldwide Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel, or the boycott against Danish consumer goods in Muslim countries following the Danish cartoon controversy in 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Lindberg, "Tragic Protest: Why Do Opposition Parties Boycott Elections?"

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 246

<sup>14</sup> To be sure, the 2005 municipal election was not boycotted.

<sup>15</sup> "Algerian fury over poll result," *BBC*, 16 April 1999

<sup>16</sup> "Results for Transitional National Assembly," *IFES Election Guide*, 12 January 2005

<sup>17</sup> "Jordan loyalists sweep election", *al-Jazeera.net*, 10 November 2010

<sup>18</sup> "Algerian fury over poll result," *BBC*, 16 April 1999

<sup>19</sup> Beaulieu, *Protesting the Contest: Election Boycotts around the World, 1990-2002*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> "Yemen's elections delayed for two years," *Gulf News*, 25 April 2009

<sup>22</sup> Also, while cross-checks of data suggest that our list of boycotts is complete, we cannot be entirely sure there might not have been some minor boycotts that have been neglected, just because they were not reported on in literature.

<sup>23</sup> The case of Kuwait in 1990 (cf. below) might be viewed as such an exception.

<sup>24</sup> "The 1996 Presidential and Legislative Elections,"

[http://www.elections.ps/admin/pdf/Results\\_election\\_1996.pdf](http://www.elections.ps/admin/pdf/Results_election_1996.pdf) [accessed on 19/1/2011]

<sup>25</sup> "Egyptian elections opposition alleges fraud," *The Guardian*, 29 November 2010

<sup>26</sup> Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (New York: SUNY Books, 1999), 165.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Schmidmayr, "Election Boycott within an Authoritarian Framework: The Case of Bahrain." Paper presented at the *First Gulf Research Meeting*, Cambridge, 7-10 July 2010.

<sup>28</sup> One example are the different Arab nationalist groups that still exist in Arab polities but have lost many of their constituents to popular Islamist groups, or groups of intellectuals favored by Western observers. On some occasions, small Islamist groups might also be tempted to avoid electoral contests which might demonstrate their insignificance. In the Bahraini boycott of 2002, two out of the four boycotting factions could actually have

considered this jeopardy: the Nasserist *al-Wasat al-'arabi al-islami* and the Shi'i Islamist Islamic Action Society (IAS).

<sup>29</sup> This is not to say that all Islamist groups in the Arab world do possibly have this scenario in mind, but some of their actors and even leaders actually might. But it is not this paper's endeavor to look into the Islamists' mindsets further.

<sup>30</sup> Pripstein Posusney, "Multi-party elections in the Arab world," 48-49.

<sup>31</sup> Beaulieu and Hyde, "In the Shadow of Democracy Promotion."

<sup>32</sup> "Bahrain parliament now down to 22 members," *Arab News*, 18 May 2011