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'Despot Housewives' or Politically Relevant Actors?

First Ladies & Authoritarian Rule in the
Middle East & North Africa

U3A - Timaru

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- Research questions:

- a) To what extent & what kind of political roles and functions do first ladies assume under authoritarianism in the MENA region?
- b) How is their socio-economic engagement part of the performance & neoliberal policy-making of authoritarian regimes?

- Main assumptions:

Arab first ladies constitute politically relevant actors under authoritarianism and cannot be reduced to representative spouses and philanthropists or 'despot housewives'. In addition to fostering the regimes' political & socio-economic agendas in various policy areas, they also set new items on the agenda. Due to their positions as political spouse of the rulers, they are able to touch social taboos and red lines. Moreover, through their active political roles they contribute to the (de-)legitimation of the authoritarian regimes.

Framework

First Lady Scholarship: Roles & Functions of first ladies

Table 1. A typology of Southern African First Ladies.

Type	Function	Implications
Spousal and Motherly Ceremonial	Low to no political profile; female/motherly qualities portrayed; 'Mother of the Nation' Represents or joins President at official events and functions	Subservient; trophy wife; signs of low status of women in patriarchal society; reinforces strength of husband; strong gender bias
Political	Serving in political, parliamentary, government or state positions; campaigning for President's re-election; spokesperson and advocate for President's administration and policies; attends party conferences; have political ambitions	Regarded as politically ambitious; political influence and interference; not accountable to electorate
Policy	Personal confidant of President; most senior advisor to President; attend policy meetings	
Diplomatic	Presidential escort; cultural emissary; independent diplomat; goodwill Ambassador	Promote country's international standing and national interests
Socially conscious	Own development Foundation or Trust; own development agenda; advocate for social causes	Trailblazer; can attract government and independent donor funds for personal and/or political purposes

Source: Adapted from Stookesbury and Edgemon (2003, 99) and Erickson and Thomson (2012, 243).

State Feminism under authoritarianism

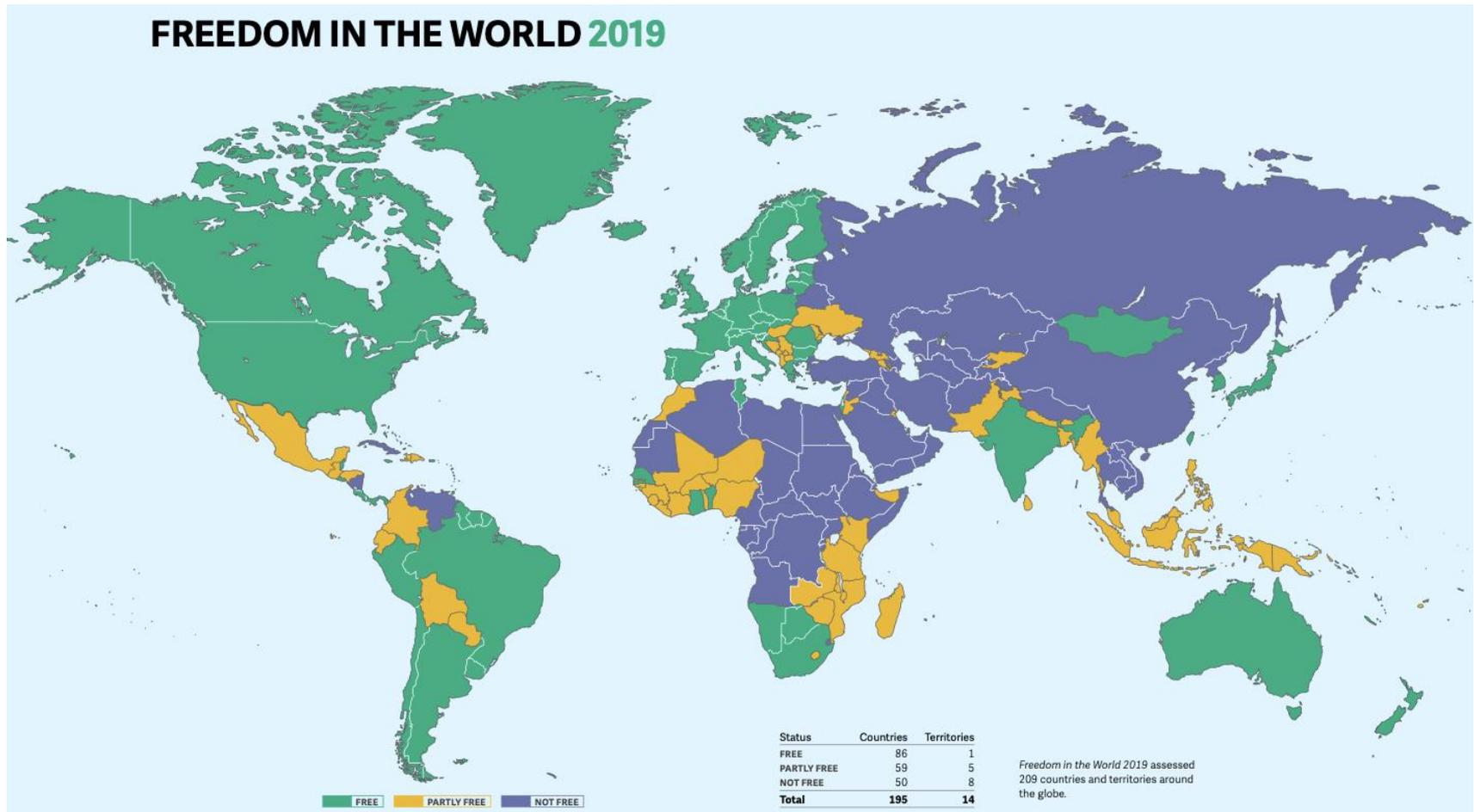
Mama (1995, p. 41):

'Femocracy – an anti-democratic female power structure which claims to exist for the advancement of ordinary women, but is unable to do so because it is dominated by a small clique of women whose authority derives from their being married to powerful men, rather than from any actions or ideas of their own. Femocracies exploit the commitments of the international movement for greater gender equality while actually only advancing the interests of a small female elite, and in the long-term undermining women's interests by upholding the patriarchal status quo. In short, femocracy is a feminine autocracy running in parallel to the patriarchal oligarchy upon which it relies for its authority, and which it supports completely.'

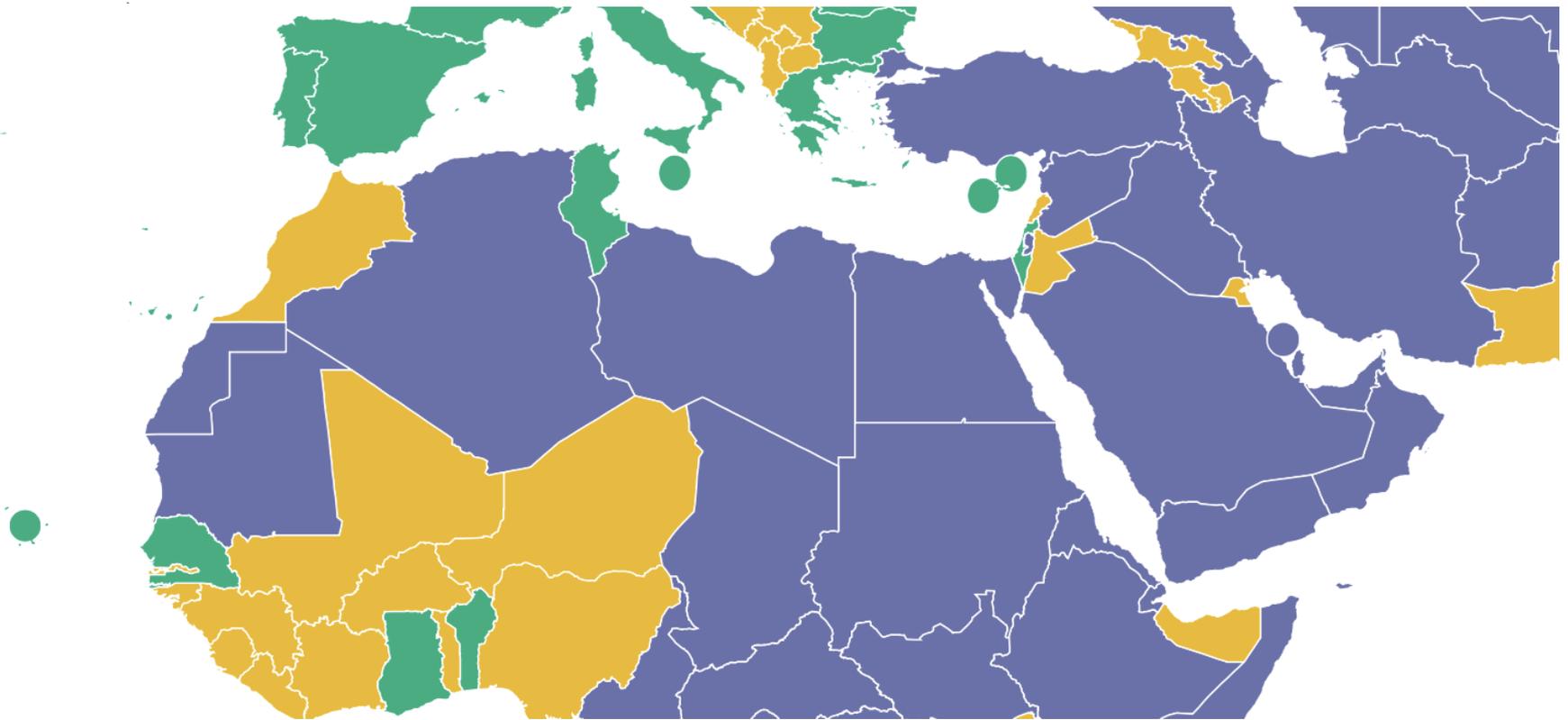
Socio-Economic Context & Authoritarianism in the Middle East & North Africa

- Deteriorating socio-economic situation, in particular unemployment, low job creation rate, quality of education/education system, social inequality & poverty
 - Neoliberal restructuring since the late 1970s, structural adjustment since the 1980s; large scale restructuring affecting politics, economy & society
 - Increasing presence & influence of business actors & technocrats as new actors in politics (pol. relevant elites; preservation of the status quo of power relations)
- Authoritarian Renewal: regime elites exploiting social, political, economic trends to preserve authoritarian rule & to generate political resources; tried & tested strategies + innovations
- Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Symbiosis of neoliberal econ. management & authoritarian statism (class struggle/elite interests; subject formation)

Freedom House- Freedom in the World 2019



Freedom in the World 2019 – MENA region



First Ladies in the Middle East & North Africa



Suzanne Mubarak (Egypt; 1981-2011)



- Born in 1941 in the Kingdom of Egypt (Al Minya) to an Egyptian father and a British mother
- degree in political science & sociology
- 1958: married Hosni Mubarak
- 2 children: Alaa (b. 1960), Gamal (b. 1963)
- Socio-economic engagement: The Cairo Child Museum; Suzanne Mubarak Regional Center for Women's Health & Development; National Council for Women; Goodwill Ambassador UN FAO



Leila Trabelsi (Tunisia; 1992-2011)



- Born in 1956 in Tunis into a working class Tunisian family
- training as a hairdresser; work experience as a travel agent
- 1992: married Zine El Abidine El Ali
- 3 children: Nesrine (b. 1987), Halima (b. 1992), Mohammed (b. XX)
- Socio- economic engagement: Arab Women Organization, Basma Association (employment disabled), SAIDA (cancer treatment)



Sheikha Moza bint Nasser Al Missned (Qatar; 1995-2013)

- Born in 1959 in Qatar into an elite merchant family
- Degree in sociology
- 1977: married Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani (2nd wife but the consort of the Emir of Qatar/first lady)
- 7 children (5 sons and 2 daughters): her second born son, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani (b. 1980), is the current emir of Qatar
- Socio-economic engagement: Education Above All; Qatar Foundation for Education, Science & Community Development; UNESCO Special Envoy; UN SDG Advocate
- Unconventional role in a conservative emirate; modern traditionalist & religious nationalist



Princess Haya bint Al Hassan (Dubai; 2004-2019)

- Born in 1974 in Amman, Jordan as a daughter of King Hussein (and sister of the current king, Abdullah II)
- Degree in philosophy, politics and economics (PPE) from Oxford University
- 2004: married Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashid Al Maktoum, ruler of Dubai (his junior/6th wife); 2019 separation
- 2 children: Jalila (b. 2007), Zayed (b. 2012)
- Socio-economic engagement: International Olympic Committee; International Federation of Equestrian Sports; Goodwill Ambassador UN World Food Programme; Dubai International Humanitarian City



Lalla Salma of Morocco (2002-2018)

- Born in 1978 into a Moroccan middle-class family from Fes (Bennani family)
- Degree in computer engineering
- 2002: married King Mohammad VI; December 2017: disappeared from public; divorce
- 2 children: Moulay Hassan (b. 2003), Lalla Khadija (b. 2007)
- Socio-economic engagement: Lalla Salma Foundation (f. 2005; cancer treatment & prevention); Goodwill Ambassador WHO; HIV prevention in Africa
- First Moroccan wife of a King who received a royal title ('princess'), appeared in public and had public roles and functions



Asma Al Assad (Syria; since 2000)

- Born 1975 in London into a Syrian upper class family (Akhras)
- Degree in computer science & French literature (King's College)
- 2000: married Bashar Al Assad
- 3 children: Hafez (b. 2001), Zein (b. 2003), Karim (b. 2004)
- Socio-economic engagement: Syria Trust for Development



Queen Rania Abdullah of Jordan (since 1999)

- Born in 1970 in Kuwait into a Palestinian family (Al-Yassin)
- Degree in business administration (American University in Cairo)
- 1993: married Abdullah II
- 4 children: Hussein (b. 1994), Iman (b. 1996), Salma (b. 2000), Hashem (b. 2005)
- Socio-economic engagement: Queen Rania Award for Excellence in Education; Jordan River Foundation; Madrasati; cross-cultural dialogue



Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan

Motherly/spousal role:

- ‘having a family of four at that time to having a family of 4 million’
- King Abdullah: ‘We both believe in the same things in what we want for our peoples. [...] we complement each other. We found out we are doing more together. [...] What makes the team strong is that she is a very articulate women, but she is an Arab woman. So, you have an Arab Queen that speaks English fluently, that understands the issues, very intelligent. And this is something that may be new in the West, that here is someone who may be a Princess Di to some people but who is an Arab woman and, as you said, a very interesting character. [...]’
- ‘[...] with time, and with his Majesty’s support, I tried to do my best for my country and its people. [...] His Majesty is my truest friend, my confident, my role model’

Politics/policy roles:

- Pillow/dinner talk; King: ‘She comes and quite articulately pushes the case. She’ll say, “I’m just reminding you, if we are going to give women more of a role, for them to feel a stronger part of society, how about trying to push the envelope?” [...] I come home at night and I have a problem with education or health, and I need someone to pick my brains. [...] I’m so busy with everything else I need somebody to raise the flag, and in all the issues she is involved in she has been very successful in doing that.’ (Macleod, 2004)
- ‘The King has the executive power and the political and economic power. I work mostly through civil society organizations. But, in any partnership, in any marriage, you sit over dinner and you talk about your day, and he tells me what he has done and is doing, and sometimes I show him a speech that I have [...]. We always say that we’re each other’s biggest fans and also biggest critics, which is a good partnership!’ (ELLE, 2006)
- ‘We realized that many countries in the Middle East are behind in the global economy; we need to catch up and we want to. [...] We are willing to take some very tough and decisive measures. [...] massive economic and education reform [...].’ (Amanpour, 2000)
- “a new vision for Arab employment”: ‘It starts with governments and the private sector forging closer ties...and ministers of education...labour...and finance finding synergies with CEO and employers... to create tangible relationships with schools, skills and the marketplace. In an ideal world, schools would feed employers with bright and hungry young minds...while employers would partner with schools to inspire entrepreneurship and innovation from which they would, ultimately, profit.’ (WEF speech, 2013)

- **Socially conscious role:**
- ‘When the queen talks to Westerners about schemes to give small loans to poor women, she calls it empowerment. But in male-dominated villages in Jordan, where tribal codes are strong, she avoids the language of gender wars. She talks instead about the ability of women to help put bread on the table. Similarly, when she talks about stopping domestic violence, she couches it in a discussion about “family security”.’ (Klaidmann, 2000)

Implications of the Findings

- Queen Rania = politically relevant actor at the center of authoritarian power + internationally
 - The various roles complement each other and have important political implications (even those with a low/no political profile)
 - Promoting and implementing neoliberal reforms and policies through foundations, initiatives, touching upon taboos and red lines ('pushing the envelop')
- Credibility and legitimacy boost and the opposite
- Desirable for first ladies to be at the same time 'despot housewife' and PRA