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The Arab Spring and the Politics of Recognition

Until the revolutions of 2011 the prospects for democracy in the Arab World have been rather bleak. While a lot of literature on Islam and democratization focuses on the potential obstacles Muslim religion poses for a democratic society, this paper tries to make a different argument: Based on a neo-Institutionalist approach, I try to demonstrate that a limited but accentuated role of Islam in the post-election governments of Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya could be a necessary first step towards the creation of legitimate and accountable governments. Formal institutions like constitutions and the legal system also depend on a complementing set of informal institutions that are mainly

provided by the dominant culture of the respective state. If the newly created post-revolutionary institutions should sufficiently reflect the basic values of a majority of the people, this form of recognition could create the necessary affinity between the government and the governed, laying the foundation for a more homogenous society as a prerequisite for democratic forms of government. This argument, however, also leaves room for the high probability that Islamic Democracy will be considerably different from Western Democracy, since legitimacy and accountability will potentially be highly religious in nature, thereby creating the possibility of alienation with former non-Muslim allies as well as increased tensions between domestic Muslim and non-Muslim populations.