

Refereed article

Unwritten Constitutions of Political Rule: Conceptual Approaches to Comparative Area Studies of Asia, the Middle East & North Africa, and Europe

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Summary

This article discusses conceptual considerations regarding the constituting and structuring of political governance in Asia, MENA (the Middle East and North Africa), and Europe. It investigates how formal and informal institutions combine with politics and unwritten political rules to form an “unwritten constitution” that acts as a *de facto* constitution for political governance. Particular emphasis is placed on interrelationships in the development of political governance, since influences between the world’s regions are not unidirectional, but interdependent and reciprocal.

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Introduction

According to Thomas Ellwein and Jens Joachim, the “history of political rule always includes the history of exploiting political rule” (1977, cited by Greven 2009: 131). To put it rather more bluntly, people who preach the common good also have their own interests in mind (Greven 2009). This not only applies to actors in autocratic and hybrid political systems, but also to those in today’s established (liberal) democracies. Most countries in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and Europe are now constitutional states. Their systems of government, including their administrative and leadership functions, are therefore arranged according to a constitutional legal framework. These systems often include liberal democratic mechanisms, or at least formally democratic ones, with which to legitimize political rule. However, these written constitutions and formal mechanisms tell us little about what actually happens in practice, or about the real-world exercise of power and recruitment of elites, the role of repression and inequality, or about the effectiveness of and interrelationships between institutions, politics, and the rules of the political (regardless of whether they take on a formal or informal shape). Furthermore, the