Revolution, Reform, and Stasis in the Maghreb

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The political situation in the Maghreb in the first decade of the twenty-first century presented a vivid image of enforced stability under authoritarian regimes that gave hardly any hint of changing in the short to medium term. The Moroccan monarchy had successfully engineered a fragmented and ineffective political system that was not posing any concrete challenge to its rule. The military-backed Algerian regime had restored the effectiveness of its institutional apparatus through a combination of repression, diversion of oil rents, and divide-and-rule political tactics. The regime of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia had effectively turned into a police state that did not let any kind of organized opposition challenge the established authoritarian "pact." (In Tunisia, this implicit understanding amounted to stability, provision of state services, and opportunities for personal advancement in exchange for political quiescence.)

And yet, against all odds, at the end of 2010 we witnessed the emergence of new forms of social and political mobilization. Starting in Tunisia and then spreading both east and west, social protest with a strong revolutionary potential quickly became common in the region. In some cases, these protests resulted in regime change (as in Tunisia); in others, they induced more or less credible political reforms (as in Morocco); in a few, they died out apparently without leaving any tangible legacy (as in Algeria). Today, looking back at these developments, what can be said with confidence regarding these different political processes and the future prospects for the Maghreb?

The main lessons that can be drawn from the recent evolutions of the regimes in Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria relate to three types of political inquiries. First, there is the issue of the continuation of trends in authoritarian governance: To what extent are the Arab uprisings a mere flicker of hope for change in polities characterized by entrenched authoritarianism? A second issue concerns the new processes and actors that the Arab uprisings have brought to the fore, and what their significance is in the post-uprising polities. The final point is linked to earlier debates about hybrid regimes and "democracy with adjectives"; the question is how to conceptualize regimes that durably combine both democratic and authoritarian trends.

Beyond idealistic notions of an "Arab Spring" that would bring forth liberal democracies throughout the region, today there is a realization that many shades of gray remain in the (formal and informal) institutional orders after the uprisings. It is common to designate democracy or autocracy as the symbolic winner or loser of recent events in the region. In practice, however, only a much finer-grained approach to the models of governance now present in these polities can begin to outline the significance (or insignificance) of their transformations.

THE TUNISIAN SURPRISE

The Tunisian path to democratic governance is highly unusual in the entire Middle East. This is so not only because Tunisia kick-started what became a wave of democratic uprisings, but also because it stayed the course. And to some degree, this longer-term success is directly linked to the

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specific characteristics of this first event of the Arab uprisings. While many pundits decreed after the fact that the collapse of the Ben Ali regime was a long time coming, regime change came as a surprise for most observers, as well as for the participants in the protests.

At the start of 2010, not a single specialist on the region or on Tunisia was predicting significant change in the country in the short term. On the contrary, there was speculation among ordinary Tunisians and analysts alike that a transfer of power within the Ben Ali clan might offer enhanced long-term opportunities for reform. Meanwhile, although the socioeconomic situation in Tunisia was not particularly good, it had not deteriorated, nor was it worse than prevailing conditions in most of North Africa at the time. In its 2010 annual report on Tunisia, the International Monetary Fund even noted that the country had weathered the 2008 financial crisis quite well. As for the political opposition, those who would soon become the main leaders of the Tunisian democratic transition were then utterly powerless due to systemic repression by the regime. The leadership of the Islamist party Ennahda, for example, mainly operated as a network of exiled activists.

Nonetheless, the Ben Ali regime inadvertently set in place policies that would facilitate the emergence of the kind of leaderless uprisings that characterized the Tunisian democratic revolution. By organizing a tightly controlled police state in which unrest and even public expression of discontent were quite rare, the regime helped create a context in which such events could quickly generate pressure. Suppressing the opposition also ensured that its leaders would not be in a position to mediate between the regime and the protesters, should there be a need to make sudden political concessions and democratic reforms.

When the leaderless protest movement started to gain momentum in late 2010, mainly fueled by socioeconomic discontent and police brutal-ity, the regime applied its usual carrots-and-sticks tactics—alternating financial incentives and repression. But it underestimated the depth of discontent, and these policies proved to be too little too late, even indirectly stoking the unrest. Ben Ali was at a loss to deal with a protest of this magnitude, as was shown by his increasingly desperate calls for calm and promises of reform on national television.

The risk of internal divisions within a ruling elite during a crisis is a staple factor in the analysis of revolutions and democratic transitions. The sudden turn of events that took place in Tunisia on January 14, 2011, when Ben Ali decided to flee the country, illustrates that even mere doubts about a regime's cohesiveness can be an important factor when the leadership feels it is directly under threat. While explanations centering on personal choices hardly constitute a very strong element of any account of regime change, it is notable that the fears of Ben Ali regarding his personal security and the loyalty of his security forces played a role in his early exit from the scene. The army would only come out to "protect the revolution," in the words of the chief of staff, General Rachid Ammar, after the departure of Ben Ali.

In Tunisia, most of the "revolutionary" aspects of the political transition actually emerged once the president had vacated the main seat of power in the country. Formerly co-opted social actors, such as the labor unions, and excluded political actors, such as the Islamists, were then able to come together in a "revolutionary commission" and pressure the former ruling elites to give them recognition and decision-making powers, while at the same time positioning themselves as the genuine representatives of what was until then a leaderless protest movement.

NONVIOLENT TRANSITION

Collaboration among opposition actors, and between them and the former supporters of Ben

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"Russia can no more buy the friendship, allegiance or positive non-alignment of the black African states than can the West. But the West, headed by the United States, must not try to use the African states as pawns in the cold war. Such stupidity would almost certainly create a solid Afro-Asian bloc."

Rayford W. Logan "Is There an Afro-Asian Bloc?" February 1961

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Ali in government, facilitated a rapid institutionalization of the demands for change. In that context, a relatively nonviolent transition from social mobilization in a revolutionary uprising to political mobilization in an electoral system occurred.

This transition nonetheless left out many of the "revolutionary youth" who had initiated regime change in the country—a situation that became increasingly evident once the enthusiasm for the first free and fair elections, held in October 2011, died down and routine governance began to regain its place. The demobilization of the protesters and their transformation into well-behaved voters were hindered by continuing economic woes, and also by the increasing polarization of the political debate once the Islamists of Ennahda were governing the country (albeit in a coalition with liberal and leftist junior partners).

Two constituencies proved relatively difficult to incorporate into the institutional mechanisms of the post-uprising Tunisian political system. The first included the remnants of Ben Ali's former party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally, and its clientelist networks, as well as Tunisians inspired by Ben Ali's predecessor, Habib Bourguiba, and his

The Tunisian uprising and political transition set some significant landmarks for democratization in the region.

model of secular republicanism. Many of them joined the ranks of the Nidaa Tounes party, which was launched in 2012 by former Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi in an attempt to counter what he saw as the rampant Islamism of the new government. Nidaa Tounes became the main engine of both parliamentary and extraparliamentary opposition to the Ennahda government in 2013, and helped bring about the transfer of executive power to a technocratic government in January 2014, ahead of the parliamentary elections scheduled for the end of the year.

The second troublesome excluded constituency comprised the Salafists, notably those belonging to the militant movement Ansar al-Shariah. Created in the aftermath of the uprisings in the spring of 2011, Ansar al-Shariah slowly but steadily gained in popularity among young protesters seeking a new meaning for their activism once a consensus on electoral democracy became institutionalized. The organization criticized the Ennahda government for implementing policies that were not "Islamic enough" and therefore, in its view, incapable of improving the plight of impoverished youth. Its activism occasionally turned violent, as with an attack on the US embassy in September 2012. Ansar al-Shariah's alleged relations with the killers of two left-wing parliamentarians led to its classification as a terrorist organization by the Tunisian government in August 2013.

Throughout this hectic period, the role of Ennahda has been crucial in shaping the trajectory of the Tunisian transition and in establishing a reasonably sound institutional order. By effectively implementing a strategy of coalition building with liberal and leftist social and political actors, the Islamist movement ensured that ideological polarization was mainly contained in the formal political sphere.

In this context, neither the street protests organized by the secular opposition nor Salafi activism was sufficient to reignite a period of systemic instability. By choosing the long-term institutionalization of their movement and the mainstreaming of their political ideas, Ennahda's leaders unavoidably displeased some of their militant base and other Islamist actors, but these actions helped consolidate an institutional system that generated legitimacy through consensus building.

MOROCCAN MODUS VIVENDI

Morocco appears to have sailed through some of the more troublesome episodes of the Arab uprisings relatively unscathed. Before the wave of regional upheaval, democracy specialists considered the country to have one of the more reformist regimes in North Africa. Although the Moroccan monarchy remained very much in control of the democratic reform agenda, it had allowed enough political liberties to develop a working model of electoral procedures and pluralism.

Certainly the palace controlled the process to ensure that no antimonarchical political force could gain prominence through the (biased) electoral system. At the same time, political actors could exercise power and have a say in policy making to the degree that they found it worthwhile to work under the palace's supervision and accepted the king's political prerogatives. One of

the main weaknesses of this set of informal and formal agreements was that Moroccan citizens granted only a relative importance to the role of the parliament and of elected politicians—as illustrated by falling participation rates in electoral contests since the first significant democratic reforms in the early 1990s.

By sharing some of its decision-making powers with elected politicians, the monarchy redistributed the responsibilities for political and socioeconomic failure. The citizenry nonetheless was aware of where ultimate political authority resided. A notable drawback of these arrangements was that social and political actors opposing the monarchic system were excluded from the formal political debate.

From the 1990s onward, the Islamist field was divided into two main camps. On the one hand, the Justice and Development Party (PJD) accepted the king's authority in order to enter formal politics. On the other hand, the activists of Al Adl Wal Ihsane (Justice and Charity) had to remain an unrecognized associative movement because they opposed the notion of supreme political and religious authority residing with the monarch.

During the 2011 wave of uprisings, Morocco was the last North African country to join the protest bandwagon. While opportunities for organized public expressions of discontent were far more available to would-be protesters in Morocco than in other countries of the Maghreb, there were still significant state-imposed constraints on protest mobilization, from repressive policies to self-censorship.

The emergence of what would become known as the February 20 Movement began with calls for protest by online activists inspired by the success of various uprisings across the region. Once these calls started to circulate widely in social media, the cyber-activists became effective at linking up with civil society organizations around the country to build local support. They were able to obtain endorsements from across the political spectrum—from the Islamists of Al Adl Wal Ihsane to leftist organizations and Berber associations—thereby ensuring a substantial nationwide turnout for the first demonstrations on February 20, 2011. This protest, the largest of its kind thus far during the reign of King Mohammed VI, challenged not only the

The relationship between the Moroccan regime and the institutionalized opposition proved resilient.

monarchy but also the modus vivendi between the monarch and the institutionalized political actors.

Many political parties experienced internal tensions between a militant base (and particularly a youth wing) pressing to join forces with the protesters and a leadership more inclined to stay out of the street protests in order to strike a better political deal with the monarchy. The leaders' views prevailed in most cases, even within the PJD, which had a heated debate. Eventually, in a televised speech on March 9, 2011, the king formally proposed a constitutional reform agenda that introduced new democratic concessions.

Having failed to obtain the explicit support of the political parties in the first few days and weeks of protest, the February 20 Movement continued to mobilize substantial numbers of participants throughout the spring. However, it failed to build momentum to challenge the political arrangement among the monarchy, the parties, and the rest of the population. In the summer of 2011, mobilization dropped off after a July 1 referendum on a new constitution and the announcement of early parliamentary elections scheduled for November 2011. Most political parties backed the constitution, since it granted parliament some new prerogatives, and it was adopted with over 98 percent of the vote. With the support of the institutionalized opposition, the monarchy effectively succeeded in redirecting a sizable wave of grassroots protests toward a more mainstream political and electoral mobilization.

The relationship between the Moroccan regime and institutionalized political actors that had been built since the 1990s placed the monarchy and opposition forces in a rather different situation at the time of the uprisings from what was the case in the more hegemonic regimes of the region (such as Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt). The monarchy had initiated a partial reform of the political system, endorsed by a large number of social and political actors. The actions of these participants created popular momentum in favor of the regime's reformist strategy and away from the protesters' more antisystemic demands.

Yet in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, the monarchy faces the same challenge: keeping the political parties as a buffer between it and popular

discontent, as well as ensuring that they remain for the most part allies of the king. This implies handing over to elected politicians enough decision-making powers to make them appear relevant in the eyes of the citizens, while at the same time preventing the political system from gaining so much legitimacy and power that these politicians can directly challenge the monarchy, especially when they are in government.

The victory of the PJD Islamists in the November 2011 parliamentary elections and the January 2012 formation of a coalition government headed by their leader, Abdelilah Benkirane, illustrate these dynamics. Due to Morocco's skewed electoral system, the necessity (and difficulty) of coalition building, and the palace's supervision of policy making, the PJD-led government has not had much opportunity to use the momentum for change from the uprisings to limit the monarch's interventions in politics and to strengthen the role of elected politicians.

Continuing economic difficulties and power struggles within the ruling coalition led to the collapse of the first Benkirane government in July 2013 when the Istiqlal (Independence) party withdrew from the coalition. The subsequent formation of more heterogeneous and docile ruling coalition in October 2013, still under the leadership of Benkirane, only emphasized the difficulties of governance. As with the February 20 Movement, the inability of Moroccan political actors to form a broad alliance in order to push the monarchy toward making serious concessions ensured that the king kept control of the democratic reform agenda.

THE ALGERIAN CONUNDRUM

In the 1990s, Algeria was the most troubled country of the Maghreb. A civil conflict between armed Islamists and the military-backed regime in Algiers left more than 150,000 dead and led to a near collapse of state institutions. Thanks to its access to international financial markets and its oil rents, the regime was able to fund its military campaigns and claw back control over most of the national territory by the end of the decade. Following this military success, a law of amnesty devised by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 1999 (after he came to power in a fraudulent election) provided an exit strategy for most of the remaining Islamist fighters.

For many Algerians, as well as for international observers, the Bouteflika administration symbolized a return to some kind of normality in the 2000s. Certainly there were still high social and political tensions, most vividly expressed during the "black spring" of 2001, when Berber-led protests in Kabylia were brutally repressed by the gendarmerie, killing over 100 demonstrators. The country continued to face significant socioeconomic problems, underpinned by the ineffective and kleptocratic organization of the state-controlled oil and gas sector. And there was ongoing violence involving Islamists who had not given up the armed struggle: principally the fighters of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, an organization that rebranded itself as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in 2007.

Stability is a relative concept. Compared with the other countries of the Maghreb, it can hardly be said that at the end of the 2000s the Algerian regime was more stable or successful than its neighbors. Yet the regime had emerged from a decade of civil conflict relatively unscathed—though this cannot be said of the Algerian population as a whole. This improving situation convinced the ruling elites to keep engineering electoral victories for Bouteflika by suppressing and/or dividing opposition movements, controlling televised media, and stuffing ballot boxes when necessary. In 2009, after a hasty change to the constitution allowing more than two consecutive presidential terms, Bouteflika was duly elected to a third term.

Popular odium toward an authoritarian ruler may not always be the most relevant factor in revolutionary situations, but it was certainly present in all the polities that underwent revolutionary regime change in the region in 2011. At the beginning of the Arab uprisings, when protesters in neighboring Tunisia and Libya mobilized against heads of state who had been in power for several decades, such sentiments of hatred toward Bouteflika were uncommon in Algeria, as citizens considered his relatively positive impact on the country over the preceding decade.

When unrest began in Tunisia in the final weeks of 2010, the Algerian public quickly became aware of the developments, due to coverage in a relatively free press. The socioeconomic character of these early protests was not lost on ordinary Algerian citizens. At the start of 2011, the Algerian government introduced the latest in a series of neoliberal economic reforms, causing noticeable price hikes and shortages of state-subsidized staple goods. In response, small demon-

strations and episodic rioting started on January 3, 2011, in Algiers and in the second-largest city, Oran. Protests quickly gained momentum over the following few days and spread to most regions of the country.

Taken aback by the size and speed of the growing unrest, the Algerian regime swiftly initiated security and economic policies that proved crucial. It decided to hold back police repression and not to involve the army, in order to avoid making "martyrs" out of protesters. This choice, which contrasted with previous repressive tactics, meant that many suburbs were effectively no longer controlled by the state at the height of the unrest. Yet it gave the protests a chance to run out of steam without the sting of police brutality to revive popular anger.

The regime also did a complete U-turn on the policies that led to the price hikes and food shortages. It went even further by introducing short-term measures designed to quickly reduce food prices and the cost of living, thus providing economic incentives in exchange for social peace. Within a week, the nationwide unrest began to subside significantly. Despite the opposition leaders' best efforts to harness the discontent of impoverished Algerians to a movement of political revolt, both spontaneous and organized expressions of dissent slowly reverted to their usual levels over the following weeks.

One of the legacies of the Algerian civil conflict is a divided and often co-opted political opposition that is not yet capable of coalition building or of attracting the large popular constituencies disappointed by the current regime. During the unrest of January and February 2011, the ruling elites' lack of legitimacy and weak political mechanisms of mobilization meant that the regime had to rely primarily on economic redistribution to ease tensions.

The regime's success in buttressing patron-client networks—both in the political arena and among the citizenry at large—set the stage for state-society interactions in the post-uprising period. Throughout 2011 and 2012, and particularly in May 2012 parliamentary elections and November 2012 local elections, social and political demands prompted the government to respond with financial concessions in a piecemeal fashion. The steady transformation of the Algerian

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ruling elite into mere patrons supporting varied clientelist networks became clearly visible after the incapacitation of Bouteflika by a stroke in the spring of 2013.

After a lengthy hospitalization that left the president barely able to speak, he clearly was no longer able to provide a general political direction for his government, nor to play the role of arbiter among the regime's different factions. Although most of his decision-making powers were actually in the hands of key members of the administration and the military, the regime still put forward Bouteflika as its candidate for the April 2014 presidential election. The president, who had not spoken in public for about a year, thus appeared on national television on March 3, 2014, to pronounce with difficulty a single sentence announcing his candidacy.

This process marks a further disembodiment of the Algerian political system, as even dubiously elected politicians are no longer expected to fulfill their formal duties. Unable to agree among themselves on a replacement for the president, and unwilling to let citizens decide in an open electoral contest, the ruling elite's various factions decided by default to retain the husk of Bouteflika as the head of state, and to continue exercising their decision-making powers by proxy and via informal channels.

RESILIENCE AND REFORM

For all its failings, the Tunisian uprising and political transition set some significant landmarks for democratization in the region. At the time of writing, Tunisia is steadily moving toward its second post-uprising parliamentary elections. It is true that these are early elections brought about by constitutional and extra-constitutional challenges to an Islamist-led government. But to ensure a smooth ratification of the new constitution and a less acrimonious lead-up to the elections, Ennahda agreed to a compromise that installed a technocratic caretaker government from January 2014 through the elections. This step may have been unconventional, but it was effective enough to reduce for a while the polarization of the public debate.

While the consensus around the new constitution does not mean that the struggle for the soul of Tunisia has been put to rest once and for

all—the exclusion of the Salafists underscores the patchiness of this new consensus—it nonetheless illustrates how a meaningful working agreement can be struck between quite different ideological camps. In the Tunisian case, political practice more than substantive ideals has made the difference in shaping a democratic transition. This process may thus provide useful insights for neighboring countries that have not come out of transitions in such a felicitous fashion (such as Egypt), as well as for those polities that still have to follow the democratization path to its logical end (like Morocco).

While revolutionary situations tend to produce large gains for some and large losses for others, reform processes are mainly about securing marginal gains and offsetting the risks of serious losses. The unrest in Morocco at the time of the Arab uprisings indicated that for many citizens and organizations, the slow and uneven process of reform was not meaningful enough to address their needs. Yet this tangible desire for a sudden and dramatic change of the political system—even getting rid of the king, as some proposed—had to address the interests of actors already deeply involved in a negotiated, institutional process of give and take. When it was put under pressure by nationwide protests, the relationship between the Moroccan regime and the institutionalized opposition proved more resilient than the new "revolutionary" practices potentially leading to regime change.

For these reform dynamics to retain primacy over time, the regime must continuously create a situation in which large numbers of citizens and organized political groups estimate that their marginal gains are sufficient to dismiss more frontal strategies of confrontation. In the postuprising context, the main difficulty facing the Moroccan monarchy is that which always confronts any form of "enlightened despotism": The system ensures the reproduction of its authoritarian characteristics, not of its "enlightened" nature. Just like the other heads of state in the region who have been toppled after decades in power, the Moroccan king, too, will grow old

and his political skillfulness will undoubtedly wane along with his perceived legitimacy. Then there will be another test of monarchic resilience in the region.

At the time of writing, the Algerian regime is rolling out its electoral machinery to ensure a fourth term in office for a president who, due to ill health, cannot even participate in the campaign. In this unusual polity, a defense of the status quo has led to a rather revolutionary reinterpretation of governance. After the failure of popular unrest to turn into a system-challenging movement, after the failure of opposition elites to link up with the protesters and to agree among themselves, and after the full endorsement of redistributive policies as the main tool of social and political control by the regime, Algerian politics has become even more formally depoliticized.

The presidential election of April 2014 dispensed with the illusion that politics was about ideas or programs of governance. Nor was it about a particular leader. In the run-up to the election there were a few attempts by different factions of the regime to challenge the existing distribution of power by putting forward alternatives to Bouteflika. This occurred in public and private exchanges between the heads of the ruling party (the National Liberation Front), the army, and the secret services. Soon, however, the elites agreed to retain the status quo, and leave Bouteflika as a token president, while they shared the prerogatives of state power among themselves.

Just as state reinstitutionalization after the civil conflict had enabled Algeria's regime to concentrate decision-making powers in the executive, the incapacitation of the president now enables the various ruling factions to siphon off the powers of the executive. Consequently, an unusual model of acephalous authoritarianism is emerging in Algeria. Such a situation provides an unpropitious recipe for reform. Although the system may now be resilient against challenges posed by leaderless uprisings, it sets the country on an authoritarian path that generates its own opportunities for sudden and unexpected regime changes. ∎