

TRADE, SECURITY AND NEOLIBERAL POLITICS: WHITHER ARAB REFORM? THE CASE OF NORTH AFRICA AFTER THE UPRISINGS

Sami Zemni, Middle East and North Africa Research Group, Ghent University

Notwithstanding the many competing explanations of the events referred to as the wave of Arab Uprisings, it is fair to assume that the mass mobilizations and large-scale protests were driven by a combination of political and socioeconomic factors and grievances. The wave of revolts, protests and uprisings have yielded many different outcomes. While Middle Eastern states seem to struggle with military counter-revolutions (Egypt), involution or even state failure (Yemen, Libya), civil war (Syria) and the uprising of armed radical religious groups, the North African regimes, with the exception of Tunisia, have by and large been able to hold on to power. However, broad and sometimes spectacular forms of protest and popular discontent with the lack of political and/or economic change, development and progress, continue to be real challenges for those in power.

Considering Tunisia, which witnessed major political changes, and Morocco, which only approved minor reforms after popular mobilizations, the question could be raised as to why both countries are facing the same levels of popular mass social protests, growing social movements and many other forms of economic grievances. The easy answer could be to state that the advent of less authoritarian regimes and more participatory and accountable forms of governance, as in the case of Tunisia, is no guarantee of elected governments meeting the demands and expectations of citizens (Kienle, 2015). Democratically elected governments may indeed fail to deliver what "*the people want*" (Achcar, 2013) but that still begs the question about why the Tunisian and Moroccan governments fail to address the socioeconomic grievances of their citizens as both governments see the constant mobilizations as a potentially destabilizing factor. The predominant, mainly Anglo-Saxon, approach to this issue has focused on what seems to be the pervading feature of Arab politics; that is, the persistence of authoritarian rule. While this could still be "used" as an explanation for Morocco's approach to social protest, it is difficult, to say the least, to understand the Tunisian approach. This comes from the usage of conventional

approaches to the political economy of the region that (a) divorce the political from the economic, (b) use the analytical categories of “state/regime” and “civil society” as a model to emphasize the tensions between “authoritarianism” (located in the state sphere) and the forces of the market and political liberalization (located in civil society), and (c) tend to obfuscate the role of international political and economic agencies and institutions (e.g. the US, the IMF, the WB,...).

To understand the complex reasons for social protest before the Arab Uprisings, the uprisings themselves as well as the post-uprising continued forms of social protest, we need to contextualize mobilizations in a longer-term perspective that does not separate the political from the economic realm and starts from the idea that the nation-state is not a self-contained political economy but rather embedded in local, regional and worldwide networks (Bogaert, 2013). Authoritarian rule is not attributable to some “Arab exception” or “Islamic political culture”, nor is it but a consequence of lopsided policies or personal agencies (the despots in power and their acolytes). Authoritarianism is rather, as Hanieh (2013) convincingly argued, the functional outcome of capitalism itself in the region. Since the beginning of the 1980s, with the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programs, political and social cleavages grew between those who profited from the (mainly economic) reforms and those who did not. Contrary to the hegemonic script of the international financial institutions (IFIs), economic growth did not lead to general prosperity or to genuine forms of political liberalization. While token democratic reforms mere window-dressing maneuvers to lure the international community were approved, the reality on the ground was grim, with authoritarian rule becoming ever more repressive and predatory. What became more and more obvious was that economic liberalization led to a perverse system of crony-capitalism that for many observers amounted to a mafia-type economy. The reforms led to accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2006); by means of ever more repressive and violent processes, people were deprived of their means of survival. Economic development led to a specific geography of uneven development in which some places and groups were privileged over others.

These developments remained largely unnoticed. The IFIs applauded the implemented reforms, vaunting many countries such as Tunisia, Morocco or Egypt as success stories of reforms. If there was one recurrent critique then it was about the pace of the implementation of reforms not being fast enough. After the wave of uprisings of 2010-2011, the IFIs did formulate some cautious critiques on their policies but nevertheless absolved their own role and responsibility in the growth of poverty and marginalization in the region. The solutions advocated as early as May 2011 at the Deauville gathering were the same as they had been for decades: raising taxes and cutting government spending, job creation through the promotion of the private sector, diminishing the red tape of business regulations, reducing the “rigidities” of the labor market (i.e. reducing social welfare and labor regulations) and so on.

While there are many alternatives that were advocated in countries like Tunisia and Morocco, it is fair to state that both countries have by and large continued to implement the same macro-economic policies as before the uprisings. The alternatives proposed by the UNDP for more state-led development based on a revived Keynesian approach or the more social-democratic and/or radical approaches advocated by forces within Tunisian and Moroccan civil society were simply discarded or pushed aside. The consequences are becoming very visible on a daily basis. There is ample evidence that the effects of these policies are the same as a decade ago: catastrophically high rates of youth unemployment (aggravated by a demographic explosion), growing working class poverty, the “squeezing” of the middle classes, and corruption. Social protest against these depressing effects has never been so significant as today. Social movements are thriving in the sense that they mobilize to make claims on the polity. In Tunisia, because of the democratic openings, this takes the form of daily strikes, petitions and demonstrations, but also more radical types of activism such as land occupation and self-organization. In Morocco, because of a stronger authoritarian reflex, social protest comes and goes in waves of contention that the authorities fear, thus setting in motion new authoritarian forms of control, surveillance and repression.

Since 2015 environmental mobilizations have been rapidly growing. As neoliberal macro-economic policies have commercialized and marketed land, water and other scarce resources, there seems to be a growing conflict between the imperatives of the developmental agenda and the specific needs and expectations of the populations. Emanating mainly from citizens living in the economically-marginalized regions of their country (e.g. the inner lands of Tunisia or the south east region of Morocco), mobilizations target the overbearing of mining industries, touristic megaprojects, cement plants, quarries and refineries. All these heavily polluting industries drain the most valuable resource of many marginalized villages, i.e. water. The struggle for drinkable water and water for local irrigation (most of the times organized on centuries old systems of communal sharing and solidarity) has become widespread, pitting local communities in many cases also national minority groups (e.g. Amazigh and Sahraoui in Morocco, Kabyles in Algeria and Nubians in Egypt) – against non-responsive authorities that either ignore the claims of the people, propose very short-term solutions or simply use repressive strategies and tactics.

Just as the wave of uprisings and revolutions were not only a cry for more political freedoms, today's multiple forms of social protest also reflect a yearning for more economic progress, redistributive justice and sustainable development. As long as debates focus on political institutions and elites, we will miss the dynamics of change that citizens throughout the region are pushing for.

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Published jointly with Aula Mediterrània.