

# Taking Stock of the Arab Post-Revolutionary Period: Elections, Parties and Public Opinion

**Gema Martín Muñoz\***

Professor of Sociology of the Arab and Islamic World  
Autonomous University of Madrid

Almost four years after the revolutions that shook many of the Arab countries, their diverse geographies and societies, as well as the divergent attitudes of their respective key players, have turned each political transition into a distinct and specific case. Whereas geopolitics in the Gulf dictated that the military crush the revolution in Bahrain, the shared interest of tribal leaders, the military and the political opposition in ousting President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen has allowed that country to embark on a complex but steady process of political transition – perhaps because it poses no challenge to either Saudi influence or American counterterrorism policy there. Whereas in Libya, the international community acted decisively, through NATO, to put an end to the tyrant and his regime, in Syria containment, rather than intervention, has been the order of the day and the regime has managed to retain the army's unbroken loyalty, resulting in a devastating war for the civilian population. Whereas in Tunisia, cooler heads and state responsibility prevailed to save the democratic transition, the transition in Egypt ended in a coup, leaving the much smaller North African State alone to represent the best organised model of democratic transition, a role that, until July 2013, both countries had shared.

## **Bahrain: The Persistence of the Protest Movement**

Although the Bahraini revolution was snuffed out in its infancy by powerful Saudi and Emirati military

forces acting on behalf of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the protest movement and demonstrations have not systematically stopped in the small Persian Gulf archipelago. The political situation in Bahrain is characterised by unconditional support for the ruling family by the GCC, the US and Great Britain. However, both the Americans and the British are concerned about the risk of instability to their vast interests in the country posed by a citizens in constant revolt; hence, their silent participation in pushing for dialogue and negotiations between the government and the opposition with a view to achieving a better power-sharing arrangement that will calm the protest movement without jeopardising the dominant position of the royal Al-Khalifa family. However, the ruling family itself is divided on the issue. While Crown Prince Salman is presented as a reformer and has led both the failed attempts at a national dialogue and some secret negotiations with the main opposition parties, the regime's hardliners are represented by the long-lived and extremely powerful Prime Minister and the security circles he controls. Likewise, although they share the same framework of democratic demands, the political opposition is also fragmented between parties (mainly, *al-Wifaq* – an Islamist party with a Shia social base, although it has always insisted that its cause is national and not sectarian – and *al-Waad* – representing the secular left) and civil-society political activism movements (among which particular attention should be called to the Haq Movement for Liberty and Democracy and the Bahrain Center for Human Rights). The former are more practised at negotiating with the government, which, since January 2014, has regained momentum heading into the October elections, even as the civil associations' demands have become increasingly intransigent and less negotiable. Nothing suggests

\* This article was written in May 2014.

that anything approximating a pro-democratic political change will be achieved in Bahrain, but there is likewise nothing to suggest that the protest movement's strength has waned or that it has become less decisive for the country's citizens.

### Yemen: A Long and Complex Transition

Unlike with the other Arab revolutions, in Yemen it was not the civic movement that led to the resignation of the President of the Republic, but rather the shared interest in ousting him of several key sectors of the country, including tribal and military leaders, who joined the dogged civil-society movement in its revolt. As a result, Yemen has, for now, managed to continue to pursue a relatively stable political transition, albeit one rife with challenges (including, among others, secessionism in the south and the Houthi rebellion in the north). January 2014 saw the end of a ten-month National Dialogue conducted by 565 delegates representing the traditional political parties (such as the Islamist *al-Islah* party or the parties from the country's south), the Houthis, new emerging political forces, youth and women activists, tribal leaders, and civil-society organisations. The more than 1,000 resolutions this body passed are intended to guide the drafting of a new constitution and to culminate, one year hence, in general elections. Initially, this political platform was shrouded in uncertainty; however, it has ultimately managed to achieve its goal, contain a bloody civil war, and get vehemently opposed political groups to sit down together to talk. Yemeni public opinion is reasonably supportive of the process, with 50% in favour of the National Dialogue Conference Document, 69% supporting the decision to hold presidential and legislative elections once the new Constitution has been ratified, and 56% in favour of the decision to extend the term of the current President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi until the process is finished.<sup>1</sup> However, as challenging as this initial transition period has been, the next stage, in which credible institutions will need to be created and a Constitutional Committee, charged with ensuring both plurality and transparency, will need to implement the resolutions

adopted by the Conference, will be even more so. The question of the south and the need to placate its separatist aspirations remains a key issue on which the Conference has spoken only once, in a resolution to establish a federal system to create "a new, more inclusive Yemen" able to put an end to the marginalisation that has plagued the south since Yemeni unification in 1994. With regard to the rebellion of the Houthis (Zaidi Shias) in the region of Saada in the north –which is also stewing with the ingredients of discrimination and which is waiting to see what kind of equitable federalism will be established – the ceasefire in force since November 2013 has been broken by Salafi groups allied with certain Sunni tribal leaders. Moreover, two Houthi delegates were assassinated over the course of the Conference. Finally, and no less important, citizens' socio-economic demands will need to be addressed in one of the world's poorest countries, where more than half the population is at risk of malnutrition and unemployment stands at 40%.

### Libya: Elections, Militias and Public Opinion

Since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi and his regime, Libya has found itself facing the immense task of re-founding the State and the nation. Unlike in other Arab countries, in Libya, the legacy bequeathed by the dictator was a vast institutional vacuum, the result of the peculiar conception of *Jamahiriyah*, or "government by the masses," that Gaddafi had established in the country. The former leader's model was based on creating local political structures in which tribes played a key role to the detriment of the State, such that in the aftermath of the revolution, there was no real strong state institutional structure in place. Like-

**Insecurity is thus the most acute problem facing the Libyan political transition and the solution seems to lie in institutionalising the regional militias in order to weed out armed groups with murkier interests**

<sup>1</sup> *Trends in Yemeni Public Opinion. Attitudes toward the National Dialogue Conference Document and the Second Transitional Period.* Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), 2014.

wise, Gaddafi's model made virtually no room for an army or police, preferring instead to use paramilitary brigades; consequently, both during and after the revolution, it was the regional militias that took over the management of their territories and the security of those who lived in them. Although the new Libya has created an army that held its first parade on 9 February 2013, it consists of only about 6,000 troops and, in fact, continues to rely on auxiliary forces from the militias, which, in theory, operate under the command of the similarly new Supreme Security Council. While many of these forces do indeed provide security in areas where the State is still unable to do so, their loyalty is fickle and, above all, the inherited institutional weakness generates mistrust and detachment towards Tripoli in favour of regional territoriality. The militias attribute political and economic powers to themselves, giving rise to tensions between the revolutionary legitimacy that they represent and the new democratic legitimacy of the elected institutions represented in the central government in Tripoli. However, there are also personal ambitions, which some militias turn to their advantage, sometimes in alliance with foreign powers opposed to democratic developments in the region, in order to destabilise the elected institutions. Insecurity is thus the most acute problem facing the Libyan political transition and the solution seems to lie in institutionalising the regional militias in order to weed out armed groups with murkier interests.

Nevertheless, the transition has not been derailed, despite the instability, crises and improvisation. One year later than planned, in February 2014, a constituent body, known as the "Committee of 60" for its composition consisting of twenty representatives from each of the country's three main regions (Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan), was elected, although it did not begin work on drafting the Constitution until late April 2014. This was followed by a political and institutional crisis leading to the complex removal of Prime Minister Ali Zeidan after a parliamentary vote of no confidence. The growing insecurity since mid-September 2013 (a strike by oil sector workers interrupted Libyan oil production, militias occupied oil facilities in the eastern part of the country, and an armed group cut the electricity and water supplies to many cities on the eastern coast) had led the parliamentary opposition – primarily the Islamist *al-Adala wa-l-Bina* (Justice and

Construction) party, the second largest force in Parliament – to call for his resignation. Finally, on 4 May, Ahmed Maiteg, a young businessman from Misrata who does not hail from the Libyan diaspora but rather the country's interior and who moreover stated he did not belong to any political party, was elected with the support of Islamist blocs with 121 votes, 1 more than the minimum 120 required. In June the Libyan Supreme Court has annulled his election and Abdullah al-Thani became Prime Minister.

### The weakness of the new political institutions – Parliament and government – are the result of an electoral law (drafted to prevent an Islamist victory) that excessively atomises parliamentary representation and prevents the formation of a strong government

In addition to the weakness of the army and the national police, which have proven incapable of preventing the militias from controlling large swaths of the country, the weakness of the new political institutions – Parliament and government – must also be taken into account. They are the result of an electoral law (drafted to prevent an Islamist victory) that excessively atomises parliamentary representation, thereby allowing disagreements and tensions to consistently destabilise Parliament and preventing the formation of a strong government with sufficient backing. Although this unstable situation has culminated in popular pressure on the institutions of the political transition, a fact underscored by the February 2014 protests outside Parliament, some 85% of Libyans still believe that democracy is the best form of government. They are moreover closer to reaching a consensus on key issues that divide their elected representatives: 55% of the population is in favour of recognising other languages in addition to Arabic, such as the minority Amazigh and Tebou languages, and a majority is also in favour of setting aside seats for women and ethnic minorities (in fact, the electoral law drawn up to elect the Constitutional Committee in 2014 already contained such a positive action

provision). Likewise, the vast majority of Libyans believe that the Constitution should cite Sharia as a source of law, although not the only one, and, agreeing on the need for some form of institutionalised regional autonomy, many – in particular, survey respondents from Cyrenaica – claim to be in favour of a centralised State.<sup>2</sup>

### **Egypt, or How to Put an End to a Democratic Transition**

A certain segment of the Egyptian population chose the worst possible way to oppose a popularly elected government: calling for a military coup. Thus, on 3 July 2013, the fledgling Egyptian democratic transition and all that it had achieved came to an abrupt halt in exchange for the satisfaction of excluding the Muslim Brotherhood from the country's public and political spheres, to which it had belonged since 1928. It is a new process of return to totalitarianism, and it confirms Egypt's status as a "military society," as described by the sociologist Anouar Abdel-Malek decades ago.

**The exclusion of a large segment of the Egyptian political class, and the mass death sentences, as well as a plethora of new laws rescinding civil liberties and rights cannot be considered a transition to democracy but rather a renewed descent into authoritarian hell**

Those who argue that the democratic transition continues directly contradict the definitions provided in any modern political science textbook. The exclusion of a large segment of the Egyptian political class, its persecution and classification as a terrorist organisation in the absence of any proof, and the mass death sentences handed down at summary trials with no defence lawyers, as well as a plethora of new laws rescinding civil liberties and

rights that have been used to imprison journalists, activists and civil society figures who have dared to be critical of the current situation (since July 2013, at least 2,500 Egyptians have died at demonstrations and 19,000 have been arrested) cannot be considered a transition to democracy but rather a renewed descent into authoritarian hell. The new 2014 Constitution hardly strays from the much maligned 2012 Magna Carta, and when it does, it is only to strengthen the regime's military and presidentialist power. This leads to the conclusion that the key issue was not what the Constitution said, but rather *who was writing it*. The appointed Committee of 50 members to this end, was the result of a non elected constituent body that excluded the country's largest political party, and was dominated by state institutions and a handful of political figures whose role was simply to make a few tweaks. The document's approval by 98.1% of voters in a referendum in January 2014 was reminiscent of earlier times that had fleetingly been believed to have been overcome. In violation of the road map he himself issued after the coup he led, rather than holding legislative elections, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi will first hold presidential ones, in late May 2014, in which he himself will stand as a candidate and which he will surely win. As for the legislative election process, the Justice and Freedom party will obviously be excluded because of its affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood. However, even parties that supported the coup (the Social Democrats, Free Egyptians, al-Wafd, etc.) will find themselves facing tougher odds due to the reinstatement of the Mubarak-era electoral system based on independent candidacies as opposed to party lists (which will favour the re-entry into Parliament of the old clans and of circles linked to the army and security services). Additional proof that what happened is no more than a power struggle can be found in the complacency of the Salafist Al-Nour party – a much more ultra-conservative formation than the Muslim Brotherhood and a greater stickler – which has thrown its support behind the new military regime and is in the process of expanding its social and political networks with a view to filling the vacuum the Muslim Brotherhood has left behind.

<sup>2</sup> *Believing in Democracy: Public Opinion Survey in Libya y Seeking Security: Public Opinion Survey in Libya*. National Democratic Institute. August 2013 and November 2013.

## Tunisia as a Model

In Tunisia, the year 2014 began with two major political events: the resignation of the government led by the Islamist Ennahda party to make way for a technocratic government that would lead the political process until the new legislative elections scheduled for December 2014 could be held, and the enactment, on 26 January, of a new Constitution laying down democratic principles. These events were the “happy” outcome of a serious crisis that threatened to derail the relatively orderly Tunisian transition in 2013. The antagonism that the secular parties and associations, the losers in the October 2011 elections, have historically harboured towards the brand of Islamism represented by Ennahda was leading to increasing polarisation, which was further exacerbated by the assassinations, in February and August 2013, of two leaders of the secular left, most likely by Salafi extremists. The secularists’ unusual show of unity around the National Salvation Front, which organised a mass mobilisation calling for the government to resign, and, in some cases, for the dissolution of Parliament too, together with the decisive support of the country’s media and the leadership of the powerful Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), both closely linked to the secular current, placed unsustainable pressure on the government. A segment of this sector viewed the Egyptian experience of the coup against the government led by Muhammad Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood with enthusiasm, and some were tempted by the illusory promises of following the same path (although, crucially, the Tunisian army shares none of the political and economic characteristics of the influential and powerful Egyptian army). Both because the events in Egypt were, in turn, reminiscent of the tragic experience of earlier events in Algeria, and because the Egyptian developments themselves underscored the risk of violence and authoritarianism that the July coup had triggered, Ennahda agreed to negotiations and dialogue (which effectively meant stepping down from the government), and the more radical secular voices were overpowered by those who chose instead to embrace that dialogue, thereby leading Tunisia away from the Egyptian path.

The country’s various secular currents will need to profoundly transform their discourse, strategy and platform if they are ever to govern the country, as is their goal

The country’s public and political sphere is thus being restructured in preparation for the forthcoming legislative elections. The Ennahda party clearly emerged weaker from this stage of the transition, while the secularists have been strengthened by their success in ousting their Islamist rival. However, the country’s various secular currents will need to profoundly transform their discourse, strategy and platform if they are ever to govern the country, as is their goal. The obsessively anti-Islamist bent of their discourse is one of their greatest liabilities, as seen both in the Ben Ali period (when they shared the same discourse as the regime and thus were perceived as having been co-opted by it) and following the revolution (with their poor electoral showing: of the 21 anti-Islamist opposition parties, 15 won four or fewer seats). Moreover, Ennahda’s fulfilment of its promise to leave government peacefully, despite having won the elections, undermines this discourse further, by offering proof that, contrary to what the secularists have always claimed, the Islamists are not seeking power by any means. By making their anti-Islamist stance the sole focus of their agenda, they have neglected to address what the majority of Tunisians consider to be most important: a socioeconomic, political and security programme that offers solutions for citizens’ true concerns. In this regard, the tension and polarisation the country is experiencing, as noted by the National Council of Social Dialogue, has also distracted the government from achieving these goals, and the citizens that carried out the revolution do not perceive that it has led to any changes in their situation; hence, the strikes and social movements taking place in post-revolutionary Tunisia.<sup>3</sup> This new stage is being defined by attempts to overcome the deep-seated drift towards division and confrontation that has, to date, prevented the various political groups in the secularist current from forming

<sup>3</sup> *Survey of Tunisian Public Opinion*. International Republican Institute and Elka Consulting, February 2014.

strong coalitions. The results have been mixed. Indeed, as the upcoming elections grow nearer, the unity achieved around the National Salvation Front (NSF), founded to spearhead the opposition to the Islamist government, is crumbling. For now, the main bloc, an NSF splinter group, is Nida Tounes, led by Beji Caid Essebsi, a former Prime Minister under Habib Bourguiba with presidential ambitions in the near future, who presents himself as the best bet to defeat Ennahda. The uncertainty regarding the formation's capacity to offer an effective government alternative stems from the extreme ideological heterogeneity of its members (including leftists, UGTT leaders such as Tayeb Baccouche, and well known members of Ben Ali's former party with important business ties, such as Faouzi Elloumi or Mohamed Ghariani, the last secretary general of Ben Ali's RCD party) and Essebsi's advanced age – he is 87 – as he is viewed as the formation's nexus and sole source of charisma. In addition, consideration must be given to another typical problem affecting such secular formations, namely that, unlike Ennahda, Nida Tounes suffers from a remarkable lack of democratisation with regard to its internal organisation, leading to schisms and generational clashes.

Other parties are trying to forge coalitions able to break up the growing bipolarity arising in relation to Ennahda and Nida Tounes, which is increasingly

**By enacting a new Constitution and showing how, in democracy, consensus and negotiation must always prevail over any other temptation to be exclusive or intolerant, Tunisia has already made history in the Arab world**

coming under fire for its inclusion of former regime figures. This is the goal of the Popular Front, another NSF splinter group, which comprises 12 political parties from the communist and Arab nationalist spheres and is led by Hama Hammami, as well as of a plethora of parties that have not yet managed to form coalitions, including Ettakatol and the Congress for the Republic, which have governed with Ennahda. Many uncertainties still surround the Tunisian transition, which will culminate in the upcoming December 2014 elections, the outcome of which remains difficult to predict, given that the final text of the electoral law to be applied has not yet been disclosed. However, by enacting a new Constitution and showing how, in democracy, consensus and negotiation must always prevail over any other temptation to be exclusive or intolerant, Tunisia has already made history in the Arab world.