

The Arab Uprising and the Stalled Transition Process

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The Arab Uprisings that began in 2010 have removed four presidents to date and seemingly made increasingly mobilised, mass publics a predominant factor in the politics of regional states. It is, however, one thing to remove a leader and quite another to create stable and inclusive 'democratic' institutions. With the possible exception of Tunisia, the mass mobilisation of the uprisings has not led to democratic transition; rather the main shared outcome has been the weakening of the State. The main divergence has been between countries in which the 'deep State' – remnants of the old regime – have proved resilient, and while making some concessions – notably elections and new constitutions – have re-established hybrid regimes based on some mix of authoritarian and pluralistic practices, notably Egypt and Yemen; as opposed to cases where the uprising unleashed civil war and failed states (Syria, Libya). Only Tunisia appeared to be the exception to this dismal picture. So what went wrong with the 'Arab transition?'

Getting from Mass Protest to Democratic Transition

The transition from revolt to democratic consolidation is obviously no simple matter. Several bodies of literature, which proceed on quite different tracks, can usefully be brought together to understand this; namely, those that deal with mass protest, 'pacted' transitions and institution building in new states. The mass protest paradigm, as notably delineated by Stephan and Chenoweth (2008), could be said

not only to describe the dynamics of mass protest, but also to have diffused discourse that inspired the Arab uprising. It argues that mass protest can effectively destabilise authoritarian regimes. Even if the regime refuses to accept protestors' demands and uses violence against them, this is likely to backfire, stimulating wider anti-regime mobilisation, precipitating international sanctions and support for the opposition, and, most importantly, causing defections in the security forces, which will be reluctant to use violence against fellow citizens who are not themselves using violence.

The problem with this literature is that it leaves little agency to ruling elites, when, in fact, how they respond to mass protest makes all the difference to the outcome. Since it is not mass mobilisation alone but the *interaction* between it and regime (elite) behaviour that matters, we must turn to democratisation studies' *transition paradigm* to understand the conditions that allow a peaceful transition to democracy. In this literature, the key is a pact between moderates in the ruling elite and among the opposition (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986), wherein the latter refrains from threatening the vital interests of incumbents who, in return, concede a pluralisation of the political system. Such a scenario is more likely when non-violent resistance encourages moderates within the regime to push for reform and/or withdraw their support from hard-line authoritarians, and less likely when rebels make maximalist demands or resort to violence, thereby empowering hardliners against the moderates. Moderates in the regime and opposition need to reach a pact on the parameters of democratisation, with a transition coalition composed of both insiders and outsiders presiding over democratisation. Where protests remain peaceful the chances of such a democratic transition increases; where the old regime is challenged via violent

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revolution from below, the chances of democratisation diminish. The former scenario was arguably evident in the Egyptian and Tunisian cases, the latter in Syria or Libya.

Finally, the institution-building paradigm (Huntington, 1968) argues that power must first be created before it can be shared. Creating power requires, first, its concentration in an elite core, and then its expansion as institutions incorporate mass participation, notably through effective political parties. The prototype is Turkey where the Ataturk regime first concentrated power and built institutions. At a later stage, when the requisites of democratisation were thought sufficient, elites presided over democratisation from above by transformation of the one-party into a two-party system and allowing competitive elections. The alternative scenario, political mobilisation without institutions, takes the form of destabilising 'praetorianism' – strikes, riots and coups. In Arab uprising countries, despite political liberalisation and pluralisation experiments, the Turkish scenario of democratic institutionalisation from above never acquired momentum and instead change was initiated by the Arab Spring's mobilisation from below. However, it is still possible that in uprising states, a transitional insider-outsider ruling coalition could concentrate authority while managing a peaceful transition to institutionalised participation. In such a scenario, the remnants of the old regime and leaders of peaceful protests would combine in a transitional government and the institutions of the old regime would be preserved. These normally included a parliament dominated by a single party. One of the keys to democratic transition is allowing opposition parties to form, the holding of multi-party elections, and convening of a constituent assembly to reach consensus on the distribution of powers in a new constitution.

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This literature helps us to identify the main differences among states that underwent an uprising and to suggest some explanations for what went wrong. In Syria, the first stage of civil resistance failed. In Egypt, civil resistance succeeded, but institution-building failed, with the fracturing of the insider-outsider coalition. Only Tunisia appears to have sustained its transitional coalition and to have initiated institution-building.

Syria: Failed Transition

The Syrian uprising began with massive protests that the Assad regime could not quickly suppress and to which it took a highly defensive stance. Yet it did not stimulate a transition to a more politically inclusive political order and led instead to civil war. For one thing, the protests began in the peripheries, the suburbs and small towns and medium-sized provincial cities, rather than at the heart of power, and indeed never penetrated the two main urban centres, Damascus and Aleppo, where the regime had co-opted key social forces. The regime opted to use disproportionate force against protestors, and, in parallel, to frame the protests as radical Islamic terrorism in order to rally the support of the secular middle class, minorities, and, in particular, its Alawi constituency, which has a dominant presence in the security forces.

If non-violent protest was going to precipitate a transition, a coalition between soft-liners in the regime and opposition combining to marginalise the hardliners was needed, but in the Syrian case, the soft-liners were marginalised on both sides not only by the regime's use of violence, but also by the maximalist demands of the opposition, i.e. the fall of the regime. In this respect, several analysts argued that the mistake of the Syrian protest movement was its "rush to confrontation" with the regime while it still retained significant support (Madour, 2013). With the hard-line opposition insisting on the fall of the regime, the soft-liners in the regime were unlikely to marginalise the hardliners. While the al-Assad regime's use of lethal force against non-violent protestors did alienate wide swaths of the public, because society became sharply, communally polarised, the opposition could be constructed, among the regime's constituency, as the 'other.' As for the many Syrians caught

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in the middle, especially the upper and middle classes, the regime’s claim to defend order against the disruption unleashed by the uprising caused a significant portion of them to acquiesce in it as the lesser of two evils; this was all the more the case once radical Islamists, and especially al-Qaida-linked jihadists, assumed a high profile within the opposition and as the opposition itself fragmented into warring camps.

Finally, on the whole the security forces did not split, and, while there were defections, notably among Sunni officers, these did not threaten the regime’s power apparatus. Instead the conflict became militarised, with the opposition taking up arms, and, as the army proved unable to retain full territorial control, precipitating the division of the country into mutually exclusive and contested zones. This suggests that a blind spot in studies of non-violent resistance may be a failure to sufficiently differentiate kinds of authoritarianism, and, in particular, to take into account those that are capable of surviving significant mass protests and also defections within the army without disintegrating. This applies particularly to states constructed in fragmented societies around a cohesive communal and armed core that may be far less susceptible to non-violent resistance regardless of its magnitude and duration. Moreover, the paradigm ignores the need of the opposition to reach out to soft-liners in the regime and instead, in stressing the vulnerability of authoritarian regimes to mass protest, encourages maximalist demands that make an insider-outsider coalition unlikely.

Egypt: Transition Reverse

In Egypt, mass mobilisation was more effective, taking place as it did in Cairo, the centre of power. The fall of Mubarak was indeed the result of a split in the regime, with mass protest and the regime’s violent response enough to push the military high command

to sacrifice Mubarak in order to save the regime and protect its own legitimacy as ‘guardian’ of the nation. However, Mubarak’s departure left three broad-camps in contention to inherit power: the revolutionary youth (particularly in coalition with leftists and secularists), the Islamists, and the military (together with the remnants of the old regime).

The army, initially led by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that inherited power after the fall of Mubarak, set out to manage the post-Mubarak transition. The SCAF did not want to rule – and hence assume responsibility for Egypt’s intractable problems – but it did make a bid to enshrine extra-constitutional guardianship of the sort the Turkish military once exercised. The military’s immediate aim was to ensure that no future civilian government could scrutinise its budget and privileges, nor challenge the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and Egypt’s alliance with the US, which had poured billions of dollars into the army’s coffers over many decades. This bid was rebuffed by a consensus of all other forces, and the late 2012 retirement of the two top SCAF generals who had been most keen on a veto role, by the elected Islamist President, Mohamed Morsi – itself allowed by a split in the top brass – shifted the power balance toward civilian actors. Nevertheless, it was widely believed that the military and Muslim Brotherhood leadership had reached a deal to covertly share power. Indeed article 197 of the Islamist-drafted constitution left the military with substantial autonomy of civilian oversight. The army was arguably representative of the ‘deep State’ that stood for the Mubarak-era status quo, albeit without Mubarak. This included the security forces, possibly also elements of the Foreign, Economic and Finance ministries, and other left-overs of the old regime (*foloul*), either entrenched in the bureaucracy or former National Democratic Party network of local notables persisting from the Mubarak regime, all of which can be seen as aligned with the military in a sort of ‘Party of Order.’ While the ex-NDP chose to lay low in the face of revolutionary groundswell during the first parliamentary elections, it backed the old guard candidate, Ahmad Shafiq, in the presidential elections. The very close outcome in which the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohamed Morsi edged out Shafiq suggested the potential of the Party of Order to drive a post-revolutionary *Thermidor*.

The Muslim Brotherhood was, after the army, the most organised force in Egyptian society, with around half a million members, an extensive social infrastructure, and considerable financial assets. It obtained over a third of the vote and 46% of the seats in the post-Mubarak parliamentary elections. Unexpectedly, the newly established Salafist Al-Nour party also did well in the parliamentary elections, especially in rural areas, adding a second thrust to an Islamist groundswell. The rise of the Islamist camp was confirmed when its candidate, Mohamed Morsi, narrowly won the presidential election. Finally, the youth and broader opposition movement that led the revolution was the main advocate of thorough democratisation. But the revolutionary youth, although united against Mubarak, appeared, compared to the military and the Islamists, to be otherwise divided over specific issues, notably social issues (role of religion, distribution of wealth), and quickly splintered into multiple rival factions. Without the organisation required to contest the elections, the revolutionary youth were barely represented in the first elected parliament and in the constitution-writing process. Nevertheless, the respectable showing in the presidential elections of the Nasserist Hamden Sabahi, arguably the standard bearer of the revolutionary camp, indicated considerable support for this alternative to both the establishment and the Islamists.

A three-sided struggle for power began soon after Mubarak's fall. This struggle turned most immediately around the constitutional configuration of the new State. In an early conflict, the revolutionary youth who perceived a bid by their rivals to hijack the revolution, attempted, together with the left and secular liberals, to get parliamentary elections postponed, fearing the Muslim Brotherhood's superior organisation, with some even wanting the military to protect the secular State against the latter. In a test of strength early in the transition, the 19 March 2011 referendum on amendments to the constitution already showed how an alliance of the military and the Islamists could mobilise a large majority of those wanting a return to 'order' and against what was framed as a bid by secularists to remove the constitutional clause designating the sharia as the main source of legislation. Only a quarter of voters backed the secularist liberal position on the amendments, mostly from the urban middle and upper classes.

Thereafter a struggle was mounted by the revolutionary youth and their allies to dislodge the SCAF from its arbitrary management of the transition.

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In spite of an insider-outsider coalition (SCAF, the Brotherhood) taking control and elections being held to a constituency assembly, institution-building was stunted. The assembly was dominated by Islamists and insufficiently inclusive of all social forces, which institution-founding assemblies must arguably be if they are to incorporate a consensus on the rules of the game. In particular, the revolutionary youth were insufficiently represented and invested in the process. Moreover, in the transition period, the absence of a permanent constitution left the distribution of powers among the branches of government unclarified, encouraging all parties to resort to extra-constitutional power plays. Key conflicts included, secularist rejection of the Islamist domination of the parliamentary constitution-writing committee and the dismissal of the Parliament by a highly politicised judiciary dominated by secularists, anticipating the next parliamentary election to be Islamist dominated. A third struggle was over presidential powers in which President Morsi dismissed top generals and saw off SCAF efforts to hamstring him. A fourth showdown came in late 2012, over the Islamist-drafted constitution, which retained a strong presidency as well as clauses that were offensive to secularists. Then, Morsi's November 2012 attempt to assume (temporary) decree powers and throw off judicial constraints sparked an opposition counter-mobilisation combining revolutionary and pro-Mubarak elements. In mid-2013 the power struggle came to a head with the military's deposition of Morsi. Thereafter, in using violence against Morsi's supporters and outlawing the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation, the military and the deep State, with the complicity of secularists and youth, in effect made a

transition to democracy impossible. No democracy that excludes one of the most important socio-political forces in Egypt can be consolidated. Only a hybrid regime, retaining extra-constitutional powers for the security forces, can hope to marginalise the Islamists and cope with the violent spillover of their resistance to repression. Controlled elections which exclude many competitors will be part of the formula, but the outcome will be very much a *hybrid* regime, with an authoritarian core and pluralist appendages.

Tunisia: Incremental Institutionalisation

Tunisia was widely seen as having the best prospects for consolidating democracy. In contrast to Syria's ethnic and sectarian cleavages, Tunisia's secular tradition, relative homogeneity and longer history of statehood allowed a stronger identification with the State as the common political community, an essential consensus needed to underpin contestation over other issues. The historically more moderate Islamist movement increased the likelihood of a compromise between Islamists and secularists. Unlike Egypt, Tunisia's larger middle class, mass literacy and unpoliticised army were more compatible with a democratic political culture.

In Tunisia, the departure of Ben Ali was, as in Egypt, a result of the refusal of the army to fire on protestors in defence of the regime. The Islamist Ennahda won a plurality in the first post-uprising elections, owing to its unique name recognition, lack of complicity in the Ben Ali regime, grassroots organising capacity, higher penetration of rural areas compared to the city-centric secularists, and its moderate Islamic message attuned to Tunisia's political culture. Unlike the Egyptian Ikhwan, however, Ennahda shared power with two secular parties, and a secularist politician became President alongside an Islamist Prime Minister.

Nevertheless, before long the secularist-Islamist cleavage threatened to destabilise the country. Once in power, the Ennahda party sought to ban members of the two-million strong former ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) from participating in politics, a move that would weaken secularists and liberals, some of whom were associated with the old regime at various points, and prevent them joining in a counter-coalition, which, polls

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showed, could mount a major challenge to Ennahda. Former regime party members were behind growing protests against the Ennahda government; the trade union movement called a general strike and faced attacks by an Islamist militia, the League for the Protection of the Revolution. Militant Salafists' attempts to restrict cultural expression they considered anti-Islamic seemed tolerated by the government. The acrimonious discourse and the murders of secular political leaders critical of the Ennahda government plunged the country into crisis in 2013, similar to what was, in parallel, happening in Egypt. Inspired by the Egyptian protest movement against Morsi, secularists mounted demonstrations against the Ennahda government and the constituent assembly. However, unlike General al-Sisi in Egypt, there was no 'man on horseback' in Tunisia's small politically unambitious military that rival political forces could call upon to 'rescue' the country from the other; hence they would need to compromise their differences through dialogue. The constituent assembly was more inclusive than in Egypt and was able to reach a compromise constitutional formula and the Ennahda government stepped down voluntarily. In Tunisia an insider-outsider coalition managed to foster enough institution-building to sustain peaceful democratisation.

Political Economy Obstacles to Democratic Consolidation

Democratic transition does not guarantee democratic consolidation and the latter is not just a matter of political dynamics, i.e. elite choices, mobilisation and institutionalisation. The political economy context, in which regional states are currently embedded, stacks the deck against democratic consolidation. The uprisings were a reaction against neo-liberal globalisation in the region, which created acute social inequalities; the revolutions, however, remained purely political, with no attempts to attack unjust economic inequalities. At the same time, they actually worsened economic

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growth, and hence prospects for addressing unemployment, by deterring investors and tourism. Moreover, enduring dependencies on the Western-centred international financial system locked Egypt and Tunisia into neo-liberal practices and removed the big issues of politics – distribution of wealth – from domestic political agendas, which risked mass disillusionment with democracy. Indeed, even in Tunisia, disillusionment with democracy set in, with nostalgia for the stability and relative prosperity of the Ben Ali period rising among the mass public. All that had changed for the unemployed as a result of the revolution was increased political freedom to express their frustrations. Given the neo-liberal context in which democratisation must take place in the global periphery, the best of the bad outcomes has tended to be ‘low-intensity democracy,’ in which elections serve as an institutionalised mechanism for elite circulation that may constrain the State but only marginally empowers the masses. However, with post-uprising elites in the Arab world constrained by economic dependency and elections offering limited policy choices, the risk is that political competition will be diverted into *cultural wars* over identity issues framed in de-stabilising zero-sum terms (Islamist vs. secularist, Sunni vs. Shia). The likely result is that political pluralism will be mixed with doses of authoritarian power in order to manage identity conflicts and turn back demands for social justice that cannot be accommodated in a global neo-liberal economic order.

Conclusion

The Arab uprising unleashed both elite contestation and mass political mobilisation, in which the

overthrow of authoritarian presidents, weakening of state establishments and initial empowerment of Islamist outsiders appeared to reverse inherited hierarchies. Mobilisation exceeded institutionalisation, precipitating ‘praetorianism’ in which politics was played via street protests, riots, and military intervention, as well as elections, without an agreed set of rules for the game. However, subsequent outcomes were radically divergent in different countries.

In Egypt a pacted transition enabled protests to remove the President while preserving the central power, but subsequently a hard-line insider (army)-outsider (secular youth) coalition came together to exclude the Islamists, aborting institution-building. The outcome will be a hybrid regime, mixing an authoritarian deep state with the residues of political mobilisation that have survived from the uprising. In Syria, where hardliners dominated in regime and opposition, protests precipitated not a pacted transition, but civil war; as the central power lost its monopoly of coercion, the result was a failed state. Only in Tunisia, the exceptional case in the region, did a transitional insider-outsider coalition survive, enabling incremental, inclusive institution-building to start incorporating participation and hence reverse praetorianism; the political economy context, however, stacked the odds against democratic consolidation.

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