

# Theoretical Framework and Types of Processes of Political Change in Arab Regimes<sup>1</sup>

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The revolutions, popular uprisings and protests that have taken place in the vast majority of Arab countries since December 2010 have triggered a *fifth wave of political change* in the region of North Africa and the Middle East, with varying effects on the nature of the Arab regimes (Szmolka, 2013: 896).

## Characterisation of the Political Regimes before the Arab Spring

In earlier works, we proposed a classification of political regimes based on three dimensions of analysis: pluralism and political competition, government performance, and civil rights and liberties (Szmolka, 2010 and 2011). At the time of the Arab Spring, there were no **full democracies** in the region. Thus, the Arab regimes were characterised as follows:

(a) **Defective illiberal democracies:** Lebanon and Iraq. Formally, these two countries can be considered democratic. Their political regimes are characterised by a significant degree of pluralism and political competition, the holding of competitive elections, and the facts that they allow the exercise of an effective government opposition and that the political system was designed by consensus and reflects the multi-

ethnic and multi-confessional makeup of the population. However, significant shortcomings can be found in government performance (governability, corruption, lack of effective control of the territory) and the effective exercise of rights and freedoms.

(b) **Restrictive and quasi-competitive pluralist authoritarian systems:** Morocco and Kuwait. In these countries, parties or political associations compete freely and interact in representative institutions, elections and other political processes. The government opposition can criticise the government and propose alternative agendas. However, the opposition is conditioned by the need to observe limits imposed by the regime; as a result, politics is not fully competitive. Some groups prefer to remain outside the institutional arena; as they do not believe it offers the necessary democratic conditions to enable their participation in the political game, they prefer not to legitimise the power. Additionally, decision-making is centralised, with representative institutions having only limited and non-independent powers. Finally, the exercise of civil liberties is likewise limited whenever it threatens the foundations of political power.

(c) **Restrictive and hegemonic pluralist authoritarian systems:** Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain and Yemen. Competition is limited by the hegemonic and ultra-dominant position of a given party, group or coalition in political processes, by barriers to opposition activities, and by irregularities in electoral processes. Thus, the political system allows the pluralist interaction of

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parties, but not access to power or, thus, government alternation. Elections primarily serve to create parliamentary majorities to support the government. Moreover, civil rights and liberties are restricted.

- (d) **Closed authoritarian systems:** Libya, Syria, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and Qatar. In these countries, there is no political pluralism, citizens cannot express their political preferences, assemblies are of a consultative nature only, governments are formed and dissolved at the discretion of the Head of State and the exercise of civil liberties is quite restricted.

### Types of Processes of Political Change

Political change can take different directions, not all of which necessarily lead to a change in political regime. These changes may affect any of the aforementioned dimensions of political regimes: pluralism and political competition, effective government performance, and political rights and civil liberties. It is thus possible to identify seven types of political change processes: democratisation, autocratisation, democratic regression, political liberalisation, authoritarian progression, democratic deepening, and democratic consolidation (see Chart 1).

**Democratisation** entails a transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one. For Linz and Stepan (1996: 1), democratisation occurs when four

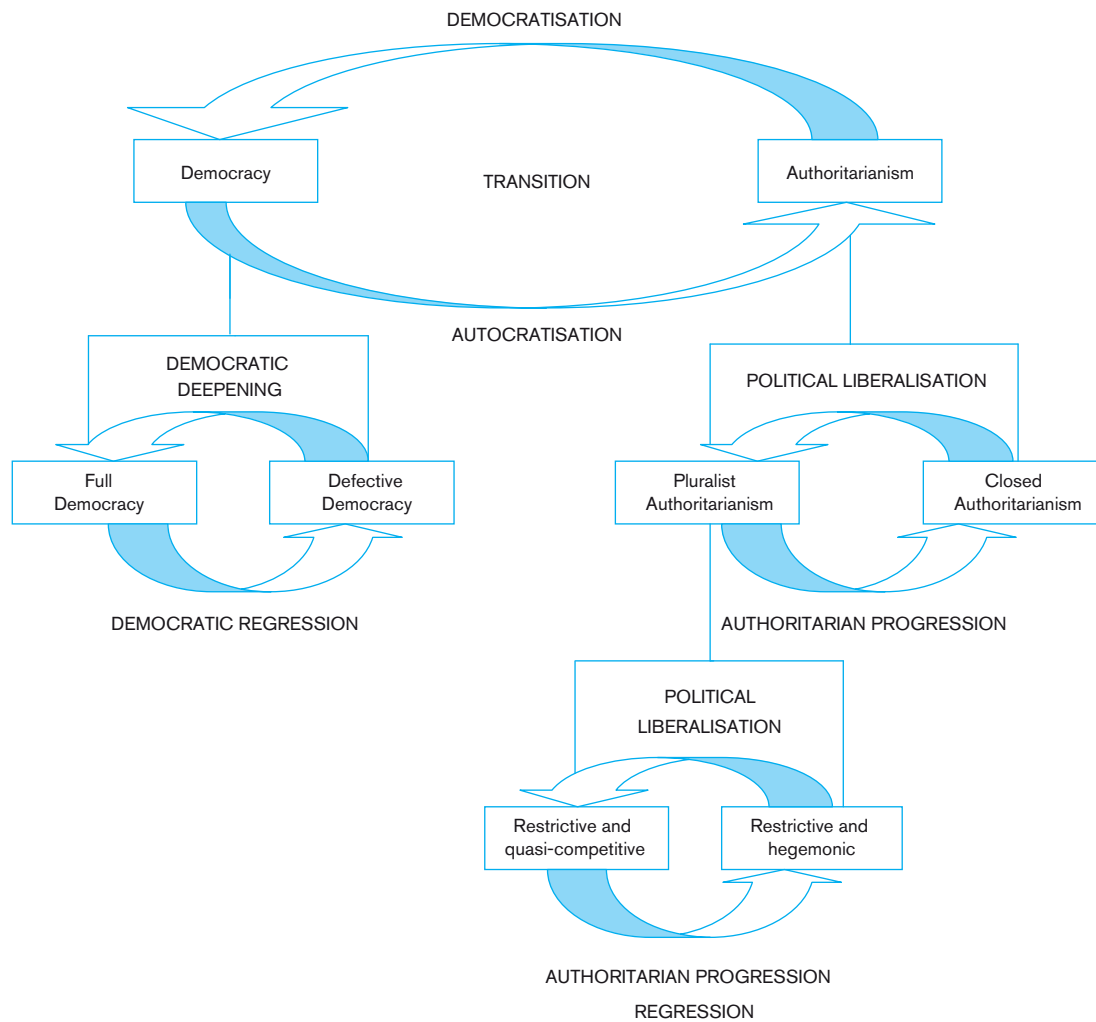
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conditions are met: there must be sufficient agreement on the procedures for electing a government; the government must have come to power as the result of a free and popular vote; the government must have de facto authority to generate new policies; and the new legislative, executive and judicial powers must not have to share power with other actors (such as the military or religious leaders). Another widely held view among scholars holds that it is only possible to speak of democratisation when Dahl's (1989) eight conditions for a polyarchy have been met: equal and universal suffrage; the right to hold elected office; free, fair and regular elections; freedom of expression; freedom of association and the independence of associations; a plurality of sources of information; institutions that allow public policy to depend on votes and other expressions of preference; and safeguards of the rights of minorities against any form of abuse by the majority. However,

TABLE 1 Classification of Arab Political Regimes

Type of Political Regime	Country	Pluralism and Political Competition	Government Performance	Civil Rights and Liberties
Defective illiberal democracies	Iraq Lebanon	Competitive and pluralist	Defective	Restrictive
Restrictive and quasi-competitive pluralist authoritarian systems	Kuwait Morocco	Quasi-competitive and pluralist	Autocratic	Restrictive
Restrictive and hegemonic pluralist authoritarian systems	Algeria Bahrain Egypt Jordan Mauritania Tunisia Yemen	Hegemonic and pluralist	Autocratic	Restrictive
Closed authoritarian systems	Saudi Arabia UAE Libya Oman Qatar Syria	Not pluralist	Totalitarian	Very restrictive

Source: Own elaboration.



Source: Own elaboration.

the situation in Tunisia, for instance, following the 2011 elections, met the conditions described by these authors, and yet it could not be called democratisation as there had been no consensual acceptance of a common framework of social and political co-existence. In our view, this final condition must also be fulfilled, in addition to the others, before it is possible to speak of democratisation.

Second, unlike democratisation, **autocratisation** entails the transition from a democratic regime to an authoritarian one. This occurs due to the arbitrary exercise of power and/or the placement of considerable restrictions on political competition and/or political rights and civil liberties.

Third, **democratic regression** entails the loss of certain democratic qualities without, however, losing

the substantive democratic core (competitive elections, effective political opposition, guaranteed rights and freedoms for a large majority). A regime can go from being a full democracy to a defective one due to interference in political decision-making by actors not subject to democratic control or the limitation of the rights and freedoms of minorities (whether political, ethnic or religious).

Fourth, **political liberalisation** occurs in authoritarian contexts. It involves an easing of political repression and an expansion of political rights and civil liberties, without fully guaranteeing them. Political liberalisation does not necessarily signify the start of a democratic transition. It can lead to a shift from a hegemonic authoritarian regime to a quasi-competitive one through expanded political compe-

tion. However, often, the political reforms carried out do not change the type of political regime.

Fifth, **authoritarian progression** entails a deepening of the authoritarian nature of the regime, which may exercise power more discretionally and even further restrict political competition and the exercise of political rights and civil liberties. It can occur in any category or subcategory of an authoritarian regime.

Sixth, **democratic deepening** refers to an improvement in the quality of the democracy. It does not in itself entail a change of political regime, as the regime was already democratic prior to the political changes; however, it can lead to a shift from a defective democracy to a full one.

Finally, **democratic consolidation** entails the anchoring of democratic values, institutions and practices and, thus, the legitimation of a democratic regime (Morlino, 2009: 116). Therefore, it is a process that takes place over time and within the framework of a full democracy.

### Classification of the Processes of Political Change Following the Arab Spring

The Arab revolutions and protests triggered processes of political change that, in most cases, have ultimately had little impact on the nature of the respective political regimes.

#### *Transitions towards Democracy: Different and Uncertain Results*

After the fall of their authoritarian leaders, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen all embarked on processes of democratic transition. However, to date, the only case of **democratisation** – and it has yet to be completed – is that of **Tunisia**. On 23 October 2011, Tunisian citizens chose a Constituent Assembly through free and competitive elections. The winner, the Islamist party Ennahda, formed a government with two secular political formations. Not without difficulty, the Tunisian political actors have negotiated and reached agreements in order to advance in the process of democratic transition. Thus, on 28 September 2013, Ennahda and the opposition parties signed an agreement establishing a road map that called for the resignation of the current

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government and the formation of a technocratic transitional government, the adoption of a Constitution, the passage of an electoral law and the holding of the next legislative and presidential elections. As a result of this partisan consensus, the National Assembly was able to approve the democratic Constitution at its plenary session on 26 January 2014. Days later, an agreed government of technocrats was formed with the aim of holding the planned legislative and presidential elections by the end of 2014. Should these two electoral processes succeed, they will confirm the democratic path taken by Tunisia.

In **Egypt**, it is necessary to distinguish between two different processes of political change following the fall of President Mubarak on 11 February 2011. First, the country embarked on a **process of democratic transition**, which failed due to a lack of understanding between the various political forces, the imposition of a specific political model, and the Army's interference in political affairs. As a result, the country has undergone a **process of autocratisation** and a return to a **restrictive and hegemonic pluralist regime**. The holding of competitive legislative and presidential elections was not enough to democratise Egypt. The elected Parliament was suspended in October 2012, following the Supreme Constitutional Court's ruling, on 14 June 2012, finding the electoral system to be partially unconstitutional. With regard to the government, President Mohamed Morsi proved unable to make concessions and reach agreements with other political forces, choosing to impose instead his own model of political co-existence, the Constitution of 25 December 2012, which was rejected by liberal, nationalist and progressive forces. Widespread social mobilisation against Morsi's authoritarian politics served as an excuse for the Military to abort the stalled process of transition. The military coup of 3 July 2013 ousted President Morsi and suspended the Constitution. Subsequently, a new process was launched entailing a return to a restrictive

and hegemonic authoritarian regime, albeit with new actors. The new political system prohibits the participation of the Muslim Brotherhood, which, despite representing a significant portion of Egyptian society, was declared to be a terrorist organisation on 23 September 2013.

**Libya** is currently immersed in a **situation of uncertainty** with regard to its process of democratic transition. Following the death of Gaddafi, the emerging political forces reached consensus on several key points: approval of the electoral system; holding of the first competitive elections; formation of transitional coalition governments representing the main political trends (independent, liberal and Islamist); approval of the procedure for drafting the Constitution; recognition of Libya's multicultural identity (Arab, Amazigh, Tuareg and Toubou); etc. However, the lack of prior institutional architecture and of experience with political participation is proving to be an obstacle to the country's democratisation, which is moreover hindered by other serious problems, such as the unilateral declaration of independence of the Cyrenaica region, insecurity due to terrorist actions, tribal confrontations, the lack of state control over the territory – as certain groups that fought both for and against the Gaddafi regime remain armed – etc. Moreover, the Constitution has yet to be approved. On 3 February 2014, the political forces agreed to extend the current Parliament's term to August to allow it to finish writing the Constitution. To this end, elections were held on 20 February 2014 to recruit the 60 members of the Constituent Assembly tasked with writing the draft Constitution. Should the Constituent Assembly fail in this mission, a committee of 15 experts will be appointed and tasked with drafting a provisional Constitution and an electoral system that will enable the holding of both presidential and parliamentary elections in September. This would signify a third transitional period, to last a maximum of 18 months, after which it could only be extended again by referendum. The **democratic transition in Yemen** began when President Saleh stepped down, thanks to an agreement promoted by the Gulf Cooperation Council and signed on 23 November 2011, whereby the President ceded power in exchange for immunity for himself and his family. The Yemeni transition has followed a different model from that of the other three countries examined here. First, Yemen chose a reformist route that includes the participation of the

former regime's elites. Thus, the provisional government arising in the aftermath of Saleh's resignation was formed in such a way as to ensure parity between representatives of the General People's Congress – the dominant party since Yemen's unification in 1990 – and the institutional opposition parties. Likewise, the president elected in the 2012 elections, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, represents an element of continuity with regard to the previous regime, in which he had served as Vice-President since October 1994. Hadi stood as the sole consensus candidate, earning 99.8% of the vote with a turnout of 64.8% of registered voters. Additionally, unlike Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, Yemen chose to reach an initial consensus among the different political forces before embarking on the processes of approving the Constitution and holding legislative and presidential elections. Thus, the National Dialogue Conference, made up of more than 500 political and social representatives, was created. This body has recommended extending the transitional period for another year – it was to expire in February 2014 – and adopting a federal system of government. The road map for the democratic transition calls for the reform of the electoral system, the approval of the Constitution and the holding of legislative and presidential elections in 2015. However, the Yemeni democratic transition faces major hurdles, such as the different points of view on the federal model of the State, the Houthi rebellion, the separatist movements in the south, and the terrorist actions of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

#### *Political Liberalisation without Democratising Effects*

As a result of the Arab Spring, other countries in the region also launched processes of political liberalisation, although not with a view to achieving democratisation.

Of these countries, **Morocco** has carried out the most far-reaching process of political liberalisation, although it has not had democratising effects for the political regime. As a result of the social protests that gave rise to the 20 February movement, on 9 March 2011, King Mohammed VI announced political reforms. Within this process of political liberalisation, attention should be called to the high degree of pluralism and competitiveness of the legislative

elections held on 25 November 2011, and, following the elections, the appointment of the Islamist Abdelilah Benkirane, the head of the party to win the largest number of seats in the House of Representatives, as Head of Government. It was the first time that Islamists were allowed to rise to power, albeit through a coalition government with other political forces. However, despite this significant progress, the King continues to wield considerable legislative and executive power that limits the power and independence of Parliament and the government. Thus, the Moroccan political regime can still be considered a **restrictive and quasi-competitive authoritarian system**.

**Jordan** also undertook a process of political liberalisation that has likewise had no consequences in terms of regime change as the political reforms and governmental changes were rejected by the opposition. In September 2011, Parliament passed a constitutional reform that was not subsequently submitted to popular referendum. The main opposition party, the Islamic Action Front, which had no parliamentary representation – due to its boycott of the 9 November 2010 elections – along with other opposition parties, rejected the amendments to the Constitution. Despite some positive progress on civil rights and limiting the government's power to pass decree-laws, the balance of power remains unchanged. The Monarch continues to wield legislative and executive powers, including the power to choose, at his discretion, the Prime Minister and members of the government, one of the opposition's main demands. Separately, although the electoral law was reformed in anticipation of the legislative elections held on 23 January 2013, the reform did not meet the opposition's demand to adopt a proportional party-list system. The non-participation of the opposition parties invalidates the representativeness of the new Lower House. In short, the Monarchy and the elites that support it continue to hold the same power today as they did before the Arab Spring. Therefore, the Jordanian regime remains a **restrictive and hegemonic pluralist authoritarian system**.

The process of political liberalisation in **Mauritania** has been limited and has failed to achieve the necessary consensus among the various political forces. First, a partially reformed Constitution was adopted on 6 March 2012. The reform was the result of the agreement reached in a national dialogue in which

President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz's party, the Union for the Republic (UPR), and various opposition parties (People's Progressive Alliance, El Wiam, Hamam and Sawab) participated. The constitutional reform increases the powers of Parliament and makes slavery and coups punishable by law. However, political power continues to be centralised in the figure of the President of the Republic. For that reason, and because it believed that Parliament was not empowered to adopt the constitutional reform as its term was to have ended in November 2011, the main opposition party – the Islamist Tewassoul – and other political forces rejected the constitutional amendments. Second, legislative elections were held on 23 November and 21 December 2013, which the UPR won with an absolute majority. The elections were boycotted by the Coordinator of the Democratic Opposition, a platform encompassing 13 political forces, although Tewassoul, which belongs to the platform, did participate. Based on the electoral results, a new government was formed on 12 February 2014 that can be defined as a government of continuity, given that the Prime Minister, as well as the Interior, Foreign, Defence, Economy and Justice Ministers, all remained in office. Third, presidential elections are scheduled to take place between May and July 2014. To date, due to the reproduction of the power-sharing system in the reformed Constitution and the new government, the lack of political consensus and the self-exclusion of a large segment of the opposition, the Mauritanian political regime can still be defined as a **restrictive and hegemonic authoritarian system**.

In **Algeria**, political liberalisation has occurred through various events and processes: the lifting (on 24 February 2011) of the state of emergency, in force in the country since 1992; the amendment of the law on parties, associations and the press; the partial reform of the electoral system; and increased representation of women in elected assemblies. The reform of the Constitution – promised by President Bouteflika three years ago – is still pending and slated to be completed during the current parliamentary term. However, the 2012 legislative elections and the presidential elections of 17 April 2014 reproduced the hegemony of traditional political actors. The FLN won the legislative elections with an almost absolute majority of seats (220 of 462). The Islamist coalition, formed prior to the elections, denounced

electoral fraud. Moreover, following a broad victory in the first round of the presidential elections, Bouteflika began his fourth term. The results of the legislative and presidential elections underscore the difficulty of achieving an alternation in power through the ballot box. Thus, Algeria remains a **restrictive and hegemonic pluralist regime**.

Finally, on the heels of the timely protests that took place in the Sultanate, **Oman** amended the Basic Law of the State by unilateral decision of Sultan Qaboos bin Said. New sections were added on the institution of Parliament and the election of the successor to the Head of State, who will be chosen by the Royal Family Council. On 8 and 15 October 2011, the *Majlis al Shura*, a lower house with strictly consultative powers, was elected for the first time. However, these two political processes are not enough to mark a change in the status of the political regime: the Sultan continues to wield absolute power, there is neither political pluralism nor the possibility of proposing alternatives, there are no mechanisms for reaching agreements between political actors, and there is not even a minimum exercise of political rights and civil liberties. Therefore, Oman remains a **closed authoritarian regime**.

#### *Authoritarian Progression despite Political Reforms*

In **Syria**, the political regime's intransigence in the face of citizens' democratic demands and its recourse to war are indicative of an **authoritarian progression** of the system, which continues to be a **closed authoritarian regime**. In this context of armed conflict, some reforms and political processes of minor importance were undertaken: the approval of the decree on political parties with a view to recognising new political forces, although the Party Affairs Committee continues to exercise control over their legalisation; elections to the People's Council without the participation of the democratic opposition; and the reform of the Constitution, on 26 February 2012, for the primary purpose of eliminating the reference to the Baath party as the leading party in the State and Syrian society and establishing a presidential term limit of two seven-year terms (to take effect as of the presidential elections scheduled for 2014).

**Bahrain** was one of the Arab countries in which the social protests gained most momentum in 2011.

However, they were harshly repressed by the regime with the help of the GCC countries. Following the repression of the protests, an independent committee was set up to propose political reforms. The result was a constitutional reform that aimed to strengthen Parliament, speed up legislative procedures and increase legislative control over the government (parliamentary vote of confidence on new governments, limited motions to censure the government – limited because the King can decide whether or not to proceed to the removal thereof –, possibility of setting up commissions of inquiry and of questioning ministers in plenary sessions). However, these proposals ignored the opposition's main demands, including with regard to the King's discretion in the choice of the Prime Minister and appointment of the upper house. The Shiite opposition, in a Shiite-majority country ruled by a Sunni monarchy, has remained absent from Parliament since the withdrawal of the Shiite Wifaq coalition in protest for the repression of the demonstrations. The partial elections held to fill these vacant seats were boycotted by the coalition, along with other political forces such as al-Minbar (a Sunni Islamist movement) and Waad (a secular leftist movement). In short, the regime's repression invalidates any progress that may have been made in the political system, while the opposition's self-exclusion from the institutions means that the Bahraini political regime continues to be a **restrictive and hegemonic pluralist authoritarian system**.

Over the last three years, many Arab countries have undertaken legal and constitutional reforms, and more than twenty electoral processes have been carried out. However, the democratising effect of these processes has been negligible in all cases except Tunisia

Prior to the Arab Spring, **Kuwait** was considered to have a restrictive and quasi-competitive pluralist authoritarian regime. However, it has since progressed towards a **restrictive and hegemonic pluralist authoritarian system**. Kuwait witnessed large public demonstrations, primarily due to the involvement of

certain members of the government in corruption cases. This could have been an opportunity for the political regime to open up. Instead, the protests were repressed, although they did lead to the fall of the government and the dissolution of Parliament. Legislative elections were thus held on 2 February 2012, from which the opposition movements emerged victorious. However, they were subsequently invalidated by the Constitutional Court. On 1 December 2012, new elections were held without the participation of the political opposition. Therefore, in recent years, political competition has been compromised, as can be seen in the legislative processes and in Parliament, which had previously acted as a counterweight to government action.

### Conclusions

So high were the expectations generated by the Arab Spring for political change in the region of North Africa and the Middle East that there was talk of the possibility of a fifth wave of democratisation. Over the last three years, many Arab countries have undertaken legal and constitutional reforms, and more than twenty electoral processes have been carried out. However, the democratising effect of these processes has been negligible in all cases except Tunisia.

This article offers a theoretical framework for classifying and evaluating the processes of political change that have taken place in Arab countries.

Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen all embarked on democratic transitions with varying results. While Tunisia is on course towards democratisation, in Egypt, the transition has failed and the regime has regressed to a system of restrictive and hegemonic pluralist authoritarianism. Meanwhile, Libya and Yemen remain immersed in their respective transition processes, for which they will need to overcome major hurdles to establish democracies. Other coun-

tries (Morocco, Jordan, Mauritania, Algeria and Oman) undertook processes of political liberalisation, although they have not altered the authoritarian nature of power in them. In still other cases (Syria, Bahrain and Kuwait), it is necessary to speak of authoritarian progression, as power continues to be exercised without the counterweight of an opposition, despite the undertaking of political reforms. Finally, in the rest of the Arab countries (Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE), there is no evidence that any processes of political change have been undertaken as a result of the Arab Spring.

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