The Future of Politics

Political Dynamics in the Arab World and the Future of Ideologies

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Over the past decade, since the eruption of the Arab uprisings in late 2010, the Arab world has witnessed a rather schizophrenic period. On the one hand, the region has experienced a tumultuous time politically, in terms of an unprecedented level of change at the highest office. On the other hand, the Arab world remains governed by authoritarian regimes in various shapes, and thus remains remarkably stable on the regime front in light of the extensive civilian unrest that manifested itself across the region.

It is against this backdrop that this article analyses the political dynamics in the Arab world and the future of ideologies, focusing in particular on political change in terms of the flavour of authoritarian regime, most notably the resurgence of military regimes and the emergence of technocratic populism. The article queries the importance of ideology, not only in this changing political landscape, but also in the perpetuation of authoritarianism in the region. The main conclusion reached is that across the various Middle Eastern regimes, whether Arab or non-Arab, regardless of the type of authoritarianism they represent and the varying extents of political upheaval experienced, there are certain commonalities. Most notably there is a decline in the importance of ideology, which manifests in a growing reliance on technocrats in government and service MPs in parliament, which has further accelerated the decline of political parties. The long-term perspective is thus one of authoritarian resilience coupled with political fragmentation and related instability.

Setting the Stage: The Emergence of Authoritarianism in the Arab World

The Arab world has been dominated by authoritarian power structures for most of the past few decades. In the wake of the withdrawal of the colonial powers from the early 20th century onwards, various forms of authoritarian governments were introduced across the region as existing states had to deal with the power vacuum left behind and new states emerged. Some of these authoritarian regimes were authoritarian by design, i.e., from the very outset, others more by chance, as the new rulers moved to shrink space for contestation and thus limited civil and political rights with a view to secure their regime’s survival for posterity.

The tight grip of authoritarianism in the Arab states is somewhat of an anomaly if compared to other regions of the world. While authoritarianism remains the norm globally, no other region has as strong a concentration of authoritarian regimes nor as limited an experience with democratic rule during the years 1973–2021, which is the period for which Freedom House holds comparative statistical data, although observers of the Arab world will be acutely aware that this holds true for a much longer timespan. Within this context of long and deep-seated authoritarianism, the Arab uprisings came as an enormous surprise to most, presenting an unexpected opportunity for political change; a so-called potential democratic moment. Yet, notwithstanding the unprecedented level of civil disobedience, the involvement of actors from across the political spectrum and from different strata of society, the Arab uprisings resulted in limited change in terms of the nature of the region’s regimes: while heads of states were replaced in some Arab countries, the power structures remained authoritarian. As discussed in more detail
below, this reality can to some extent be explained by weak political ideologies, feeble political parties and, eventually, the resurgence of the strongman, whether in military uniform or civilian robes, thus in some ways mirroring the early post-independence period in many states.

The Resurgence of Military Regimes

The military played a central role in politics across the Arab world following the Bakr Sidqi coup in Iraq in 1936 – the first military coup in the region’s so-called modern history. Over the next couple of decades, i.e., throughout the 1930s-1960s, military regimes were also brought to power via a series of coups – some violent, others more administrative in nature – in states such as Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen. In the kingdoms of Jordan and Morocco, the regimes remained civilian, but the monarch relied heavily on the military, thus mirroring the state of affairs in the non-Arab states of Israel and Turkey. As the military became a progressively more pervasive and institutionalized actor in the political sphere, divisions within the various regimes began to grow as heads of state sought to shore up their dominance and sideline the military in politics. Furthermore, the previously stable military regimes of Latin America were beginning to fall by the late 1970s, and Arab leaders were clearly gripped by a sense that the era of military rule was perhaps beginning to near its end.

Consequently, several Arab leaders initiated a process of “civilianization,” i.e., distancing themselves from their military background and restricting the military’s overt role in politics. By the late 1980s, as the third wave of democratization swept across the globe, most Arab states outside of the Arabian Peninsula had adopted some form of competitive legislative elections, even if in a heavily engineered form. By the early 2000s, several countries in the region had also introduced competitive presidential elections, although these were largely nominal, thus frequently earning themselves the label “façade elections.” Hence, on the eve of the outbreak of the Arab uprisings on 17 December 2010, the Arab Middle East was dominated by civilianized military regimes, many of whose leaders had been in power for decades and which were therefore presumed to be stable. Examples include Algeria’s Abdelaziz Bouteflika (1999-2019), Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011), Libya’s Muammar al-Gaddafi (1969-2011), Sudan’s Omar al-Bashir (1989-2019), Syria’s Bashar al-Assad (2000-), Tunisia’s Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011), Yemen’s Ali Abdullah Saleh (1990-2012) and the succession of military figures in Mauritania (most notably Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, 2008-19, and Maamoua Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya, 1984-2005).

The Arab Uprisings: Fragmentation and the Lack of Ideology Present an Opportunity

The point of this historical lens is to illustrate that what happened on the regime front in the wake of the Arab uprisings was far from novel. Many an Arab state had found itself at this junction previously. However, whereas the Arab electorate had looked to the military as a source of progress and stability while also buying into its nationalist, socialist and, at times, pan-Arab ideology, the resurgence of military rule in the Arab region post-2010 was brought about by different mechanisms, in light of the corresponding political context.

Prior to the uprisings, the Arab world had already begun to witness a decline in ideological identification in line with trends across the globe. That said, the ideological downturn in the Arab states was somewhat delayed as Arab voters initially looked to the military as a source of progress and stability while also buying into its nationalist, socialist and, at times, pan-Arab ideology, the resurgence of military rule in the Arab region post-2010 was brought about by different mechanisms, in light of the corresponding political context. As these proved unable to deliver once in power, as demonstrated in e.g., Turkey (under the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) and Morocco (with the ascent of the Parti de la justice et du développement, PJD), political apathy grew, particularly amongst the youth, who by the time the uprisings broke out had become increasingly engaged horizontally and outside of the traditional political arena. The youth were thus not disengaged, but rather differently engaged. Unlike previous generations, which had been committed to ideologies such as e.g., nationalism, socialism and

1 Some of these were police states (Tunisia) and/or known as mukhabarat (intelligence) states (Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen and the Palestinian National Authority).
Islamism, the youth of the Arab uprisings era were largely engaged on an ad hoc or issue-based basis. The uprisings were one such issue, which mobilized youths as well as other population strata with the objective of overthrowing the incumbent regime. However, the protestors as well as the silent supporters of the uprisings did not commit to a shared political platform, partly because of the decline in the appeal of ideology, but also as a consequence of the fact that they did not make up a unified movement. Some members were ideologically committed, but to different ideologies, others were not ideological in outlook at all, some were members of existing movements or parties, others were unaffiliated. They all shared the desire to see the incumbent regime brought down, but their reasons for this differed, and so did their objectives for the future, in the instances where protesters had determined such goals. These two factors resulted in fragmented protest movements devoid of a clear agenda and objectives, and without long-term political ambitions. There was never the desire to institutionalize and become part of the political establishment, with a view to changing things for the better from the inside.

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Hence, whereas the first wave of military regimes in the Arab world had been supported by the citizenry, largely for ideological reasons tied to socialism, nationalism and the new state-building project in the post-colonial era, the mood had changed by 2010. The Arab uprisings were very much dominated by a focus on what was wrong with the individual Arab states, which many protesters argued took away their dignity, largely as a consequence of growing poverty, corruption and nepotism. They wanted more and better opportunities, a more positive outlook, but, qua their lack of shared ideology, offered very little in the way of achieving this beyond getting rid of the incumbents. The absence of a shared ideology and long-term political ambitions eventually also bred instability at the highest level. As long-seated heads of state were forced out in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen and eventually also Algeria and Sudan, there were no clear and credible alternatives, which were palatable to the majority of the electorate or, indeed, the elite to succeed them. Thus a period of political upheaval and uncertainty ensued.²

Saving the Nation: Lessons from Algeria, Egypt and Sudan

In Algeria, Egypt and Sudan, the military capitalized relatively quickly on the weakness of the incumbent leaders and the fragmented nature of the protest movements. The first to act on the situation was Egypt’s General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who overthrew the country’s first democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, in a military coup in the summer of 2012. Met with little domestic, regional and international resistance to his actions, and with many observers reluctant to label the coup a coup, the military moved to institutionalize its grip on power, staging presidential elections in which General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi won landslide victories, thereby lending a fig leaf of legitimacy to the new military regime, before doing away with such popular consultation following amendments to the constitution in 2019.

While the military’s ascent to power in Egypt went against the official discourse of Western support for democracy, the lack of sanctions against the el-Sisi regime very clearly demonstrated the West’s willingness to tolerate military regimes if they provided stability and a bulwark against Islamist actors gaining power. In that respect, el-Sisi proved to be a trail blazer – avantgarde – showing generals elsewhere that power could, indeed, be had and maintained without consequence. Hence, when political upheaval directed at the incumbent regime escalated in other Arab states, generals with aspirations of power took a leaf out of el-Sisi’s book.

² In Yemen, the transition was relatively smooth as Ali Abdullah Saleh’s second in command, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, had already been the acting President for some time.
In war-torn Libya, General Haftar did his utmost to take the country’s highest office; in Algeria, General Ahmed Gaid Saleh effectively forced ailing President Bouteflika to resign on 6 April 2019, after the army withdrew its support and threatened to have Bouteflika declared unfit for office; in Sudan, only a week after the fall of Bouteflika, the military deposed President Omar al-Bashir and installed Lieutenant-General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan as the country’s new head of state. In Algeria, promises were made to hand over power to a civilian president, and while this transfer did transpire in the sense that the current President, Abdelmajid Tebboune, is a civilian, power remains in the hands of the military, which, unlike in Egypt, rules from behind the scenes. In Sudan, power was to be returned to a civilian interim president in 2019 and subsequently to a popularly elected civilian president in 2022, but just prior to the 2019 transfer, President Burhan and the army staged a second coup d’état, purging the government of its civilian members. Like el-Sisi in Egypt, Burhan remains in power in Sudan.

In all cases, the military’s intervention in politics was justified as necessary; as the only means to save the nation, the reform project set in motion by the protesters, and to avoid instability and, potentially, descent into civil war, as had happened in Libya, Syria and Yemen. But there was little in terms of promises for the future. No programmes or clear deliverables and objectives with ideological underpinnings. The military justified its political interference – and permanence in politics – qua its status as an expert in delivering strong leadership, stability and security. And this is where the post-uprising military regimes connect with the civilian authoritarian leaders – new and incumbent – in the other Arab states: the reliance on experts coupled with populist tendencies.

**The Rise of Technocratic Populism**

Compared to the cases of Algeria, Egypt and Sudan, where the military has strengthened its grip on power, Mauritania, where the military remains unscathed at the helm, and the war-torn states of Libya, Yemen and Syria, where the military continues to play a central role in politics, Tunisia is somewhat of an outlier in the sense that the military remains – at least for now – a much less central political actor. In some ways, Tunisia’s set-up following President Kais Saied’s constitutional coup in the summer of 2021, appears closer to its non-Arab cousin, Turkey, where President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has gradually sidelined the military, while relying increasingly on experts as well as more traditional methods/actors such as e.g., the police, the judiciary and the press, since his arrival in power in 2014.

That said, as already alluded to above, if one scratches the surface a little, it becomes readily apparent that most of the post-uprising authoritarian Middle Eastern states, whether Arab or non-Arab, and regardless of their brand of authoritarianism, are very similar in terms of the practices they have institutionalized – or are beginning to institutionalize – in order to guarantee the survival of their regimes. At the core of this new mode of authoritarianism appears to be the phasing out of a unifying ideology in favour of what some have labelled “technocratic populism,” i.e., a situation where the State is managed like a firm and experts are used to bypass accountability. Hence, while ideology is largely irrelevant, loyalty is central to the functioning of technocratic populism, as is a passive citizenry, something which is achieved via the gradual erosion of institutional checks and balances as well as the demobilization of the general public by undermining the confidence in the country’s representative institutions in conjunction with the increasing reverence of (loyal) experienced personalities unbound by ideological ties.

Turkey under Erdogan, Egypt under el-Sisi as well as Tunisia under Saied are arguably the most prominent examples of technocratic populism in the region at present. All three cases display similar traits: the erosion of core institutions legitimized as necessary to save the national project; the vilification of opponents as foreign agents and enemies of the people; the increasing reliance on experts (loyalist technocrats) to stifle the opposition and the emergence of political alternatives; and, finally, the reverence of the saviour leader, who is above the law and who needs to stay in power to oversee the successful implementation of the revolutionary project.

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3 Disregarding Bahrain, Oman, the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, where contestation is limited and political parties prohibited, as well as Libya, Syria and Yemen, which are presently plagued by civil war.
Despite these commonalities, there are also plenty of differences. Perhaps most interesting, are the divergent paths these technocratic populist dictators took to arrive in power, thus illustrating how it would be a mistake to assume that there is only one route to populism, i.e., that it is a path-dependent phenomenon. Erdogan had been a prominent figure in Turkish politics and within the AKP and its predecessors before he turned to populism and distanced himself from the party and other ties, thereby elevating himself above the system, presenting himself as the saviour expert, who could take Turkey forward. In Egypt, following the 2012 military coup, el-Sisi cultivated his persona as a man of the people, speaking on behalf of Egyptians as the saviour of the nation in troubled times, thus evolving from being a saviour based on his military credentials to simply el-Sisi, the saviour. Finally, in Tunisia, Saied arrived in power in competitive presidential elections stretched over two rounds. Without much fanfare, all party-affiliated candidates were eliminated in the first round, before Saied relegated the other independent, Nabil Karaoui, to second place. Alarm bells were not set ringing when two candidates without party affiliation competed for the nation’s highest office, despite the rhetoric presenting charismatic, paternalistic strongmen as savours of the “Tunisian revolution,” nor did anyone sound the alarm in light of the two candidates’ lack of ideological commitment, which saw Saied in particular mix left and right-wing messages in his campaigning in classic populist style. Saied’s emphasis on combating corruption via the application of the Constitution to the letter struck a chord with many Tunisians and initially earned him the support of the powerful union, the Union générale tunisienne du travail (UGTT), which had played a central role in the Jasmine Revolution in 2010/11. Thus, most people did not take much notice of the President’s declared intention to revise the Constitution with a view to getting rid of some of the red tape that was preventing him from achieving his goals. Alarm bells only started ringing when the constitutional coup was well under way and it became very clear indeed that Saied’s project is about more than combating corruption. But by then it was too late to stop – or even reverse – the coup via democratic means.

The Importance and Implications of the Growing Reliance on Technocrats

At present, there is a preoccupation with populism given the arrival in power of populist leaders across the globe. However, as the three examples above illustrate, not all populist leaders are populist at the time they arrive in power. Some become populist once in office – populism is often creeping. Hence, what observers need to be watching out for is, on the one hand, the gradual circumvention of the system of checks and balances and the weakening of institutions such as the media, the judiciary, parliament and security forces, either by their co-option or their stifling. On the other hand, a close eye needs to be kept on the space afforded the opposition, whether individuals or organized groups. The exclusion of broad swathes of society, e.g., members of the media, the intelligentsia, certain ethnic or religious groups, and members of various political parties by their labelling as enemies of the people and foes is another warning sign. As the groups of people that cannot be trusted grow in volume, the doors are open for the legitimate introduction of experts, which are predominantly chosen for their loyalty to the firm, and which can be replaced with relative ease should said loyalty falter.

Casting a quick glance at the various Middle Eastern governments in office today, there are good grounds for ringing alarm bells. From the data available, it is readily apparent that the reliance on technocrats is a central element of most authoritarian regimes in the region at present. To list just a few examples: in Algeria, following the 2021 elections, 25 out of 34 cabinet ministers are technocrats; in Tunisia under Saied, all 25 cabinet ministers are technocrats; in Morocco, the figure is 5 out of 20 following the elections of 2021; in Egypt, all cabinet ministers are presently technocrats; while in Turkey, the cabinet is made up of 11 technocrats and 8 with party affiliation.

The growing preference for technocrats in government, in some cases coupled with a reliance on in-
dependents and/or so-called “service MPs” in parliament, has contributed to the further erosion of political parties, which had already begun with the onset of the decline in the importance of ideology amongst the electorate from the early 2000s onwards. While to many people, the marginalization of political parties is perhaps not the most pressing issue, given their waning popularity amongst the populace, it is a very worrying trend from the perspective of democracy. Political parties are an integral part of democracy, and democratic transition and consolidation is also less likely without political parties, which can aggregate and represent citizen demands much more effectively than individuals or alternative vehicles, such as e.g., movements, groups and lists. Arguably, one of the main reasons why authoritarian leaders in the Arab world have come to rely so heavily on technocrats is the reality that political parties strengthen the voice of the opposition and have the potential to foster alternatives to the incumbent regime. Replacing party leaders and cabinet ministers with party affiliation is not impossible, but it is trickier than replacing one technocrat with another, because the latter do not have the same kind of committed support structure behind them.

A further problem with the rise of technocrats, which is invariably accompanied by a further decline in the role of ideology and the perceived failure of institutions, is that it fosters a growing emphasis on local identities too. This issue is of particular relevance to the Middle Eastern region, which is already marred by tribal, ethnic and sectarian conflict, both within and between states, as the conflicts in Libya, Syria and Yemen bear witness to, and the inability to form lasting governments in e.g., Iraq and Lebanon. So-called “service MPs,” who emphasize transactions over ideology, and which have long been a well-known phenomenon in Jordan, can now also be found in Egypt and Kuwait for instance. And the situation in Iraq, where the government-formation process is effectively a bargaining exercise between different ethno-sectarian leaders, is another reminder of how politics is increasingly becoming a question of the amassing and division of spoils amongst one’s kind, rather than citizen representation based on shared issues cutting across cleavages and grounded in ideological beliefs. The result is a move towards a zero-sum game in a context where the stakes are high, as resources are depleting fast, inequality is growing and corruption is rife. This does not bode well for the future, whether in terms of prospects for democracy, stability or social justice.

Further Reading


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4 Effectively clients with clients of their own.