# DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: A MORE AMBIDEXTROUS PROCESS?

ABSTRACT: Democratization is always an ambidextrous process. On the one hand, it triggers a universalistic set of norms, events, processes and symbols. On the other hand, democratization involves a much more particularistic set of 'realistic' adaptations to the structures and circumstances of individual countries. In analyzing the structures and conjuncture of countries in the Arab World during the past decades, scholars looked at them from the perspective of persistent authoritarianism. In this essay, we exploit democratization theory – as well as its converse by analyzing the universalistic set of events, processes and symbols of democratization elsewhere in the world, and then identifying the particularistic characteristics of timing, location and coincidence that seem likely to affect the political outcome of regime change in the countries affected by recent popular uprisings in Arab World.

**Key words**: democracy; democratization; Arab politics; transition, autocracy

# DEMOCRATIZATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: A MORE AMBIDEXTROUS PROCESS?

Democratization is always an ambidextrous process. On the one hand - the first process- triggers a universalistic set of events, processes and symbols. While on the other hand, - the second process- involves a much more particularistic set of 'realistic' adaptations to the structures and circumstances of individual countries at specific moments in time. Through the past decade scholars analyzing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have focused on the factors impeding the democratization process therein, or more precisely, the factors which have added to the resilience of authoritarianism. While the Arab uprisings of 2010/2011 have provided some doubt in the validity of the persistence of authoritarianism, recent events in the region, the re-autocratization of Egypt, regime breakdown and civil wars in Libya, Yemen and Syria, and the resilience of monarchical authoritarian regimes like Jordan, Morocco and the Gulf have brought this debate to the forefront of analysis: Do MENA countries have a prospect for democratization, or are they locked in authoritarianism? This essay is an attempt to analyze authoritarian breakdown and the prospects of democratization and authoritarian resilience in MENA through focusing on a seven speculative observations, based on the second process -- the realistic adaptations -- of democratization, that seem (to us) to describe significant similarities and differences between Arab countries in "transition" and earlier ones in Southern Europe, Latin America, Eastern Europe Asia, and the post-Soviet republics.

**Democratization: An Ambidextrous Process**

The first process of democratization that triggers a universalistic set of events, processes and symbols, empowers citizens to acquire human rights and civic freedoms they did not have before. Access to different sources of information proliferates. Political parties are allowed to form and to compete openly with each other. Elections are held whose outcome is uncertain and they continue to be held regularly. Voters freely go to the polls and their votes are counted fairly. Winners are declared and occupy seats in parliament or positions of executive office. Even more importantly, losers allow them to do so. Constitutions are revised or drafted anew and ratified. If successful, the transformation in regime results in the country's acquiring a new and exalted status by being admitted to the international club of 'real-existing' democracies (REDs). Though the club of REDs has its limits and deficiencies, or what some scholars have termed "defective democracies" (Merkel, 2004), this article is concerned with analyzing the possibility of democratization toward RED, irrespective of these deficiencies.

These are typically pragmatic adjustments or negotiated compromises to be found in the implementation of the above set of prominent events, norms, processes and symbols. The rights and freedoms that citizens acquire may be formally identical, but social, economic and cultural barriers prevent citizens from accessing them effectively, least of all equally. Constitutions usually contain special guarantees for privileged groups, particularly propertied ones, and assured status for powerful institutions, especially military forces, state religions, civil services and para-state corporations that protect them from the uncertain outcomes of legislative elections and rotation in executive power.

The transition process in some countries in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet republics elections may seem competitive, but incumbents often have access to state resources and control over the media that bias their outcome. Voters may be free from coercion in going to the polls and the tabulating of their votes may be accurate, while the constituencies within which they are grouped may systematically benefit some at the expense of others. Winners, even opposition ones, may be allowed to take their seats, but in parliaments that have little or no effective power either to initiate or to modify legislation. Executives, whether elected directly or indirectly by parliaments, may be empowered to rule by decree during "emergency conditions." And, finally, the criteria for membership in that club of REDs (and the benefits in terms of regional or global, material or symbolic rewards) are fuzzy and easy to ignore when it is to the advantage of existing members. So-called 'hybrid regimes' (Diamond, 2002; Bogaards, 2009), like Bulgaria and Romania, have managed to make it into even the most select regional club of REDs: the European Union. On the other hand, these same factors, especially parliamentary elections and political liberalizations have ensured authoritarian stability in some countries, especially in MENA (Gandhi, 2008; Albrecht and Schlumberger, 2004; Lust-Okar, 2005). Which requires a closer look at the factors leading to RED versus those leading to authoritarian reversals. In the MENA context, authoritarian breakdown of sorts occurred in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen in the immediate aftermath of the Arab uprisings of 2011. While Libya, Yemen and Syria are facing civil war today, Egypt and Tunisia, were the only two countries viable for democratic transitions.

The work on democratization that emerged since the 1980s resolutely focused on those events and processes that all Latin American, South European, Asian and to some extent East European transitions from autocracy had in common – at least since

the mid-1970s. It also presumed that, regardless of the mode of transition, something approaching a RED was the intended collective objective – although it did not presume this goal would always be achieved. Some analysts even went out of their way to reject the notion, usually advanced by country or area specialists, that because of differences in culture, geographic location, previous type of autocracy or level of development, the outcome was pre-destined to be different (Schmitter and Karl, 1994; Schmitter and Karl, 1995; Bunce, 2000).[1] No one who studies the process of regime change and possible transition could deny that there were many factors that contributed to making a democratic outcome easier and more probable in the past: a more prosperous and developed economy, a higher rate of economic growth, a more equitable initial distribution of income and wealth, a more ethnically and religiously homogeneous society, a colonization by a less malevolent European or American power, a lesser dependence on petroleum or natural gas (not to mention other potentially lootable natural resources such as diamonds or gold), a history of previous attempts at democratization, an absence of civil war or threatening neighbors, a relatively short period of previous autocracy – the list could be (and has been) extended almost infinitely.[2]

By placing an emphasis on the combination of uncertainty and agency that defines the transition process and its 'abnormal' politics, "transitologists" treated these previously alleged pre-requisites as mere facilitating or debilitating factors that could be overcome by what Machiavelli called "*virtù*" – the capacity of an individual political actor (or, today, an organized group of political actors, a party or movement for example) to assess the rapidly changing situation, see the opportunities for creative responses, and to come up with a set of rules and practices that accommodated to the specifics of a given polity – while respecting the three generic

principles of democracy, namely, political equality or citizenship, participation in collective action and accountability of rulers.[3] The problem with this analysis however, was that it placed a heavy emphasis on the *virtù* of leaders and their cooperation in forming a RED, something which proved not to be the case in many post-communist situations and, so far, in the Middle East and North Africa.

In this essay, we will focus our analysis on the second process of democratization, which shows the similarities and differences between the Arab world and the other countries that have attempted to transform their regimes since 1974. Our self-assigned task is to examine the peculiarities of a specific subset of countries that have begun to experiment with such "transitions" after lengthy periods of autocracy. These countries, especially those which have undergone recent massive popular uprisings, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria, are crucial case studies where the heightened uncertainty of transition is especially important in shedding light on the potential constraints impeding the achievement of RED.

**The Usual Suspects**

The literature on politics in the Arab world has persistently emphasized the resilience of authoritarianism on various grounds. A number of "usual suspects" have been regarded by area specialists as responsible for the absence not just of democracy in the region, but of serious attempts at democratization or even abortive attempts at liberalization. They can be summarized from institutional, political economic and geo-strategic perspectives.

(1) The fact that civil society and opposition political parties are inherently weak and have been persistently manipulated by the state. The autocratic Arab regimes were adept at manipulating the electoral processes through building effective

patron client relationships and by liberalizing their autocratic rule to include and co-opt opposition (Lust-Okar, 2004; Bellin, 2004; Pousney, 2004; Schlumberger, 2008; Albrecht and Schlumberger, 2004). Moreover, opposition political parties, non-governmental organizations and trade unions have been delegitimized by the state corporatist practices of long standing autocratic regimes which means that these "representative" institutions are barely credible in their actions on behalf of their members and, hence, deprived of voluntary mass followings – even after they have been liberated from direct dependence upon the state (Ottoway and Hamzawy, 2009).

(2) The fact that the Arab world is home to an especially strong array of coercive institutions that have long had "the capacity and the will to repress democratic initiatives originating from society" (Bellin, 2012, p.128). Proportionately speaking, military and security expenditures are among the highest in the world and their officers are often deeply entrenched in a variety of productive enterprises and commercial institutions.

(3) The fact that the existence of rentier and semi-rentier states in the region has resulted in the financial independence of many Arab regimes, especially the Gulf States, from societal pressures. The state can develop and implement policies independent from public opinion. An essential part of the rentier state system in the Arab world is that the rulers do not need to tax their citizens or to seek legitimacy for their policies through competitive political processes (Luciani, 2013).

(4) The fact that virtually all of the countries in the region have suffered from internal (civil) or external (international) wars and, hence, have an unusually great dependence upon their respective militaries which in turn has encouraged their systemic insertion into both internal politics and the domestic economy. According to Ibrahim Elbadawi and Samir Makdasi, "the Arab world *is* different with regard to the

impact of conflicts on democracy; while conflicts have led, for whatever reasons, to a subsequent democratization process in other regions, in the Arab world they have not" (Elbadawi and Makdisi, 2011, p. 2).

To both specialists and non-specialists, all of these hypotheses had some plausibility and, together, they seemed to over-determine the absence of sustained efforts at democratization. The MENA countries do seem to form an unusually coherent world region with their common language and religion, not to mention geographic propinquity and roughly similar colonial experiences. Academics and policy-makers tend to treat them as if they were almost some sort of a socio-cultural unit and, therefore, expected to react similarly to the same stimuli and to learn quickly from each other's experiences. Yet the closer one examines these alleged commonalities, the more they dissolve into disparities and differences.

In the pages that follow, we examine how these usual suspects relate to our seven speculative observations, which were essential for a democratization process to take place in Southern and Eastern Europe, and in some Asian and post-soviet republics. Four of the seven speculative observations, are based on international and regional factors: neoliberalism, democratic neighborhood effects, Information and Communication Technology, regional and international wars. While three observations are based on internal factors: political parties, limited mobilization, and trust in Western countries.

The simple fact that Arab "transitions" began later, in an era of more globalized capitalism and a different phase of its business cycle, and in a particularly conflict-ridden geo-strategic location seems to have considerable significance with regard to their likely outcomes. The international financial instutitons, mainly the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade organization have

had an impact on rolling back European and American social democracies and economic nationalism in the global south. In the MENA region, which have been host to large public sectors, and large social subsidies were targeted by these financial institutions through the promotion of civil society actors which would help in shrinking the role of the state in the economy (Beinin 2014). However, this strategy was also to undermine a democratization process. To put it bluntly, these elements of change suggest that a transition to democracy will probably be more difficult in the region. Instead, the current process of regime breakdown and change in MENA seems to be leading either to the destruction of the state and, hence, no regime at all e.g. in Syria, Libya and Yemen, or, in Tunisia and Egypt, to a transition toward some sort of hybrid regime rather than democracies.

**First Speculative Observation**

Today, Western liberal democracy is less closely associated with a protracted period of economic prosperity, job security, social equality and greater risk protection. Those who were caught in the wave that began in 1974 and that was given additional momentum in 1989 could confidently expect that – after paying some transformation costs – they would end up being not only freer but richer. The "*Trente Glorieuses*" as the French call them – the thirty years after the end of the Second World War -- and the social contract that produced them have ended. Since the 1980s, not only have growth rates fallen, but social and economic inequality has risen dramatically in most countries of Western Europe and North America. Neo-liberal policies of privatization, deregulation and de-taxation have severed the nexus linking productivity and wages. Workers and employees in local and national industries have been marginalized in relation to increasingly powerful and trans-nationalized

producers and financiers. The welfare state that tied together democracy and capitalism through economic growth and re-distribution is being "re-negotiated" and "down-sized" and the promise of full employment has been reneged, even by leftist parties. Embarrassingly, the close association between regime type and superior economic performance has switched to autocratic technocracy and state capitalism – with China as the leading exemplar – although, admittedly, it is difficult to assess the extent to which mass public opinion in the MENA region has become aware of this seismic shift. Unlike the developed world, citizens in this region of the world probably still associate 'real-existing' democracy with freedoms and social equity.[4] Economic relations between REDs and MENA are not dependent on freedoms and democracy, but on mutual economic interests. Thus, countries in the North were more interested in economic stability and economic relations than with democratization (Carapico, 2013).

Neoliberal economic policies amalgamated with authoritarian rule, have had important implications throughout the MENA region. Structural readjustment polices have been manipulated to favor political and economic elites. Markets became freer and more capitalist since the 1990s; nevertheless, they remained non-competitive in nature. For instance, Oliver Schlumberger (2008, p. 634) observes that, "formal rules [were] not applied arbitrarily, as is often read, but in a way that ensures and promotes the interests…of social alliance of incumbent political and private economic elites, that is those social groups who formulate and organize the legal-institutional framework." These policies have increased the gap between the rich and the poor, and have alienated and marginalized the middle classes. Mass mobilization against neo-liberal policies has been on the rise since their forceful implementation in the mid 2000s. The majority of MENA countries have experienced large demonstrations

calling for greater socio-economic benefits. In Egypt, for instance, strikes by workers increased in 2006, especially in al-Mahala industrial city. Out of these actions emerged a new and important protest movement, namely, the April 6 movement that called for not just economic, but also political rights. In Tunisia, demonstrations erupted in 2008, focused on socio-economic inequalities generated by a mining company (Ottoway & Hamzawy, 2007). Nevertheless, even after the fall of long standing dictators in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, the linkages between neoliberal public policies, neo-patrimonial rule and a crony capitalist economy did not change. The structures remained the same, only the individuals occupying and governing them changed. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, through their agent, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), attempted to take over the role of the former single ruling National Democratic Party. One very important aspect of the Brotherhood rule from June 2012 till June 2013 was that once its leader, Mohammed Morsi, was inaugurated in office, he immediately met with leading businessmen to assure them that the neo-liberal policies of his predecessor would persist. Al Nahda movement in Tunisia, led by Rashed al-Ghannoushi, entered the first coalition government and provided its first prime minister. It has openly proclaimed the need for a neoliberal economy in order to facilitate foreign direct investment in the country (Ahmed, 2012). With the ousting of Morsi and the imposition of a military backed government, neoliberal polices are still being implemented, with no prospects for their suspension. On the contrary, al-Sisi regime is implementing laws to cut down the budget deficit, and to decrease the public sector pension plans.[5] An important reason for the military to support neoliberal policies is that fact that since the mid 2000s, when Mubarak privatized many public sector industries, these changed into holding companies, which were often directed by the military. The Egyptian military also controls companies such as

Egypt Tourism, Food Industries, and the National Cement holding (Abul-Magd, 2012).

All of which means that the main demands that motivated the social tumult and uprisings – increased inequality, greater job insecurity and massive youth unemployment -- in Egypt and elsewhere in the region, have not been addressed by the initial "transitional" governments. The policies remain the same; only the faces of those applying them have changed. The demonstrators called for "bread, freedom, and social justice" and their situation has only worsened due to the persistence of political turbulence and uncertainty, coupled with the maintenance of neoliberal economic reforms. Similarly in the post-Soviet regimes, mainly Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, privatization measures were infested with corruption, creating a new capitalist class who placed their own interests over the interests of the state. Russia and Ukraine are important examples, where the economic elites used their economic resources and their political connections to enhance their political power. Some business elites won seats in parliament just in order to enjoy immunity from prosecution (Radnitz, 2010). These regimes have instilled economic policies for their own self-interest, thus advancing the power of "authoritarian" structures, rather than liberalizing and opening up the political system. For example in Ukraine, former Kuchma allies who were major economic tycoons played a major role in financing protest movements preceding the Orange Revolution of 2004. When Yukoshenko subsequently was inaugurated as president, the economic interests of these economic tycoons were enhanced (Levitsky and Way, 2013). Former authoritarian regime associates used patronage, media and other economic resources to advance their power. Their economic outlook did not

include more social equity for the newly liberated citizens of their country, but rather focused on enhancing their own wealth within the 'new' regime.

**Second Speculative Observation**

Something also happened during this period to one of the core institutions of all REDs: political parties. Historically, the formula for successful democratization was: "Get the Parties Right!" They would emerge spontaneously with the convocation of credible competitive elections to nominate candidates, produce programs, conduct campaigns, fill legislative and executive positions, and form governments. Once they had accomplished this, the citizens were expected to accept the limited policy alternatives offered to them and settle reliably into the identities proffered by the same parties from one election to another. The early democratizers in Southern Europe and some of those in Latin America had relatively well-established parties that had survived and struggled against autocracy. They continued to play a key role in the consolidation process. For instance in Latin America, mainly Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, political parties have predated military dictatorships. In addition they have strong loyalties in their respective societies. Nevertheless, in other Latin American countries like Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador for instance, political parties are less stable and social support is low (Espindola, 2002). In Eastern Europe this was not the case and the best that most parties could do was to adopt Western labels and symbols (Hlousek and Kopecek, 2013).

What then can one expect of political parties in the present MENA context where the historical legacy is less favorable? During most of its recent history, opposition political parties have been kept under strict control. In effect, they were

tolerated only as legitimizing agents with regard to the outside world – allowed to compete as long as they did not threaten to win. Thus, the rule rather than the exception in MENA was one dominant political party controlling the legislature, the executive power and most of the civil society institutions, especially professional syndicates and workers' unions. Some minor secular parties were tolerated, provided they played the role of a "loyal opposition." They could criticize specific policies, but never challenge the regime leadership or institutional status quo. Examples of these include the Syrian National Progressive Front, the Egyptian Neo-Wafd, and some Algerian political parties (Albrecht and Schlumberger, 2004; ). These parties were largely out of touch with the general public, suffered from severe internal rivalries, had very few followers (and virtually no members) and were inevitably irrelevant – and they remain so after the change in regime. Religious, i.e. Islamic, movements on the other hand had larger and more loyal mass followings due to their greater presence in the public sphere, especially in mosques and related charitable organizations. When elections took place in Tunisia and Egypt after the toppling of Ben Ali and Mubarak, it came as no surprise when Islamists won them. Many new parties have emerged after both uprisings, but these are still organizationally embryonic, financially weak, ideologically fragmented and riven with internal factional struggles. Consequently, citizens who have grievances against the new government do not rally behind opposition political parties. They take their protests directly to the streets and public squares – and do so repeatedly, if fruitlessly. In Egypt for instance, the Tamarrod (Rebel) movement was able to mobilize Egyptians against Mohamed Morsi, the first Islamist president. Opposition parties on the other hand, were unable to strike a political deal with Mohamed Morsi and the Brotherhood. They preferred to join (but not lead) the movement with its military

backing rather than to demobilize citizens, restore a modicum of political order and enter into the sort of consensual agreements that are needed in order to ensure the consolidation of some form of hybrid democracy. After the 2014 presidential elections and the ascendance to power of military strongman Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt, political parties have shown further decline. Today there is no dominant political party, the Parliament is composed of fragmented and weak pro regime parties in addition to a number of independents (Al-Sayyid, 2016).

Civil society organizations and actors, which were important conduits for democratization elsewhere in the world -- like in Poland for instance where the Solidarity trade union movement which was the main reason for the success of democratization therein (Diamond and Bernhard, 1993) -- have been constrained by government intervention during the past two decades in MENA. When civil society is strong and has the ability to mobilize against an authoritarian regime, like the cases of Poland, South Korea and South Africa, it can foster a democratization process. Nevertheless, when civil society is underdeveloped and cannot mobilize against an authoritarian regime, like Belarus and Russia, authoritarian leaders can manipulate civil society and retain their power (Way, 2014). .According to Eberhard Kienle (2011, p. 147) this was "the direct effect of government attempts to selectively redefine liberties in order to cushion external pressures for political liberalization and open up new funding opportunities that were technically reserved for non-state actors." Political constraints and lack of freedoms have significantly hampered the ability of civil society to work as significant actors in any of the democratization attempts in the Arab world. The Arabian peninsula and Qaddafi's Libya had the most restrictive rules against civil society actors. The latter has a unique problem in this regard. During his 42-year tenure in office, neither civil society organizations nor

political parties were allowed to form. In this sense, according to Dirk Vandevalle, Libya will have to develop *ex novo* its own national identity and political community. In addition, economic institutions were long neglected and abused by Qaddafi. Entrepreneurship was highly discouraged; the public sector employed almost 90 per cent of the labor force; health and education systems were never allowed to develop autonomous institutions (Kienle, 2011). It is, therefore, no surprise to find Libya descending into a civil war between many rival factions and two competing governments, each claiming legitimacy, one in the eastern city of Bayda (which is internationally recognized) and the other in Tripoli (Lacher, 2015).

Contrary to Libya, civil society and opposition parties have long been present in Egypt, which hosts the largest number of such organizations in the region. Nevertheless, the Mubarak regime was adept at controlling them through laws that constrained their role and effectiveness, especially with regard to their potential as a force for democratization. The state security apparatus had extensive oversight over civil society. Another important, if indirect, obstruction was the regime's tolerance of religious based organizations, syndicates, unions, business associations and service based organizations, while harassing secular pro democracy organizations, like human rights organizations and protest movements. Some scholars have gone as far as to argue that a large number of the allegedly non-governmental organizations in Egypt are "un-civil" (Abdel Rahman, 2002, 2004). After the ouster of Mubarak, these three key issues remain present, with no sign that the initial Islamist-dominated government was, and today's Sisi regime willing to tolerate, much less to enhance the independence and freedom of civil society (Yerkes, 2014). As in the case of post-Soviet republics, this weakness and dependency is likely to prolong political uncertainty. For instance, some post-Soviet regimes like Ukraine, weak political

parties exacerbated political crisis and legislative weaknesses. In other hybrid regimes like Armenia, Belarus and Russia, party cohesiveness was lacking. In Russia for example, President Yeltsin chose to increase his own personal power over strengthening political parties, which weakened their scope and cohesion (Levitsky and Way, 2013).

**Third Speculative Observation**

The technology of politics has been changing rapidly. The importance of personal, face-to-face communication has been declining for some time in REDs, replaced by reliance upon mass media, first radio and later television. In the initial transitions from capitalist autocracies where the media were largely in private (and often very concentrated) ownership, the main effect was to privilege conservative parties, but not to the extent that it became problematic. In the former socialist autocracies with their state media monopolies, however, their ownership and regulation became one of the most contentious issues during the transition.

Regime change in the Arab world is emerging in a quite different media context, namely, that of the new information and communication technologies (ICT). Recent studies have shown that the internet increases democratic expectations in authoritarian regimes (Nisbet, Stoycheff, and Peacrce 2012; Hussain and Howard, 2013). In addition scholars have argued that an increase in internet usage helps in contributing to the development of democratic institutions (Hussain and Howard, 2013). Eva Bellin argues that activists were able to bypass their repressive authoritairain regimes through social media and satellite television. These were

platforms for disseminating information, symbols, and stories that enabled public mobilization against Arab dictators (Bellin, 2012). Marc Lynch (2012, p. 10) asserts that "the transformation that led to the Arab uprising starts with new information and communications technologies, including satellite television, the Internet and cheap mobile phones.". What this has done is to undermine the saliency or both private ownership and state regulation and to replace it with forms of political communication that are highly dispersed, difficult to control and especially available to young people – and a little or no cost. The net effect seems to be to enhance the possibility of rebellion through the capacity to assemble large numbers of participants in a short time and to do so in a way that makes police repression much more difficult.

The problem is the ephemeral and fragmenting nature of these facilitated collective responses – and the consequent difficulty in transforming them into formal organizations capable of elaborating a common strategy and committing their followers to follow it. An obvious consequence of this is repeated and persistent mobilization on the streets and squares. Demonstrations by youth and workers in Egypt and Tunisia have been the rule rather than the exception after the ousting of the previous regimes. Democracy – at least as we have known it – requires real not just virtual communication and effective organization among citizens – whether in political parties, interest associations or social movements. What remains untested – but so far elusive -- is whether eventually through repeated interactions and the development of mutual trust, these ephemeral actions of protest can be transformed into reliable actions of organized support.

**Fourth Speculative Observation**

On paper, the Arab world looks like a region, certainly more so than Europe or Latin America. And we know that democratization does benefit from a 'neighborhood effect.' Diffusion of its ideas and models seems especially intense among countries that are near to each other and share common linguistic, ethnic and/or religious traits. What the Arab world does not have are viable and attractive regional organizations capable of ensuring the existence of a security community, imposing political conditionality on its members and rewarding conformity to its policies. The fact that the combination of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) did offer such features to the nascent democracies in Southern and later in East-Central Europe (but not in most of the Republics of the former Soviet Union) was of considerable importance in explaining their relatively rapid and successful transitions. By insisting that all candidates for membership had resolved their (many) outstanding conflicts with bordering states and that all their governments were democratic, respectful of human rights and the rule of law and capable of administering their treaty obligations (the so-called Copenhagen Criteria), the latter post-communist group was effectively guided and monitored through their respective transitions. It should be noted, however, that the combination was not sufficient to prevent the violent conflicts that ensued from the breakdown of the Yugoslav Federation – and three of the resulting new polities in Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia remain in political limbo. In the case of Latin America, the regional organizations were much weaker (and most were under the hegemony of an extra-regional power, the United States), but they did intervene to positive effect when crises occurred in Paraguay, Peru, Guatemala and, much less effectively, Honduras.

The Arab world has the League of Arab States (LAS), and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (and, much less relevantly, the African Union), but neither have the material capacity nor the political unity to intervene in order to promote or to protect democracy.[6] The LAS and GCC unlike NATO, EU and other regional organizations, is mainly interested in protecting the sovereignty of its member states *per se* (Korany, 1987). For instance, the LAS supported the Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, even though the International Criminal Court charged him with crimes against humanity (Ottoway, 2010). While Tunisian and Egyptian citizens were rising against their regimes in December 2010 and January 2011, respectively, the LAS convoked an Economic and Social Summit in the Egyptian city of Sharm el Sheikh in January 2011 that studiously ignored the uprisings and made no reference to the explosion of popular demand for the very issues that they were discussing. In addition, the role of GCC in supporting authoritarianism in the region through direct militarily intervention in Bahrain and Yemen and through money aid to Egypt encourages authoritarian stability rather than a democratization process.

The possibility of EU membership strengthened opposition and constrained incumbents in Eastern Europe, while the absence of possibility to join the EU in many other post-Soviet countries like Belarus, Armenia, and Ukraine strengthened the scope of authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way, 2013).

**Fifth Speculative Observation**

Democratization in South America and Southern Europe benefited from the existence of a prior security community. No one in these regions had reason to fear a major armed conflict between them or an invasion by an extra-regional power.[7] In the case of Eastern Europe, this could not be discounted, but membership in NATO prior

to membership in the EU resolved much of the problem. In the Arab world, two major differences in the security environment are present and both are not favorable to democratization. First, the United States and Israel have strategic interests in keeping stable autocratic regimes in the region. After the ouster of Morsi, the Sisi regime has been intent on strategically securing the interests of both Israel and the US. Their military operations against terrorism in the Sinai are highly valued by Israel. Though the US has rhetorically condemned the military coup of July 2013, Marc Lynch observes that: "of course it is the military, not the Muslim Brotherhood, that remains the closest ally in Egypt. The United States has not publically supported the coup, but the coup could ultimately provide Washington with more opportunities to effectively engage" (Lynch, 2013).

Second, the external dilemma posed by the oil rich Gulf countries that have a strong interest in retaining autocracy throughout the region. These monarchies through their rentier economies are capable of sustaining an effective social contract that does not depend on civic rights or democratic institutions. For instance, in response to the Yemeni uprising, Saudi Arabia demonstrated its unambiguous preference for maintaining the status quo in that neighboring country and did all that it could to ensure a smooth transition in power between Ali Abdallah Saleh and his vice president Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi – without major changes in institutions. When in January 2015, the Houthis, a rebel movement in Northern Yemen, rejected the new draft Constitution, and seized control of state institutions, the Saudi regime intervened militarily with other Arab allies such as the UAE and Egypt to return to the status quo which in turn led to a protracted civil war (Baron, 2015). When demonstrations became widespread in Bahrain and threatened its monarchic autocracy, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) led by Saudi Arabia intervened

militarily to stop them. The GCC also conducted talks with Jordan and Morocco concerning prospective membership in the Council in an obvious effort to reinforce and maintain monarchy in response to the upsurge in the demand for democracy in the region. International powers, mainly the US and the EU, did not oppose or even complain about these measures. On, the contrary, they welcomed (or, at least, tacitly accepted) them as necessary for ensuring political stability and, with it, their access to oil wealth. They have repeatedly demonstrated – rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding – that regional security is more important to them than the democratization of the region. The GCC and, especially, Saudi Arabia have spoken and acted in favor of the opposition to the Syrian dictator, Bashar al-Assad. But this has little or nothing to do with support for democracy. Rather, the calculation is that the toppling of Asad, a close ally of Iran, would bring about a shift in power relations that would make Saudi Arabia the hegemonic actor in the Gulf Region.

In the Republics of the former Soviet Union, nowhere, except the Ukraine, "did Western engagement play a decisive role in either toppling authoritarian governments (as in Serbia and Slovakia) or inducing them to behave democratically (as in Romania). Consequently, post-Soviet regime outcomes hinged primarily on the domestic balance of power, and because civic and opposition forces were generally weak, few regimes democratized." (Levitsky & Way, 2013, p. 233).

**Sixth Speculative Observation**

For many of the reasons mentioned above, the populations in Arab countries (especially, their political opposition groups), are suspicious of the motives of Western powers (especially, those of the United States) when these outsiders offer or

attempt to meddle in their respective regime transformations. In Southern Europe and Latin America, outside intervention was relatively unimportant, but it was tolerated and did not generate much internal conflict.[8] In Eastern Europe and among the Baltic Republics of the former Soviet Union, it was welcomed with open arms. Virtually all political forces openly declared their desire to imitate Western democratic practices. Indeed, when combined with the anticipation of economic prosperity, the desire to become a 'normal' European polity was a major determinant of actor motivation during the transition. The result was a literal invasion by US and European national aid agencies, foreign NGOs and regional IGOs – first and foremost the European Union, but also the Council of Europe and its Venice Commission. Whole chunks of new legislation were copied almost verbatim from foreign texts; many associations and movements were funded almost entirely out of foreign funds; foreign advisors played a key role in the conduct of electoral campaigns.

Very few political actors in the Arab world are so unconditionally motivated to imitate Western political practices. They certainly tend to be less admiring of them and more wary of the motives hidden behind those who proffer them as models. Especially as Western intervention in the region, especially the American led invasion of Iraq exacerbated sectarian tensions through its assertion of developing an ethno-sectarian model in Iraq, which they claimed to be a "democratic" model. In Egypt the Islamist backed Constitution of 2012 placed greater restrictions on individual freedoms and gave unprecedented powers to religious institutions, especially the al-Azhar Grand Sheikh and the Coptic Orthodox Church. Later, after the ouster of Morsi, the Egyptian Constitution which was passed in 2014 grants un-restrained powers to the military, ensuring an authoritarian reversal rather than a democratization process. The role of the military in Egypt, since the 2011 Uprising

was decisive in obstructing a democratization process through directly intervening in civilian government's affairs and later through its 2013 coup d'état. While in Tunisia, the role of the military was mainly through its withdrawal of support from Ben Ali, while later going back to its barracks (Albrecht, 2015).

Al Nahda in Tunisia, unlike the Brotherhood in Egypt, changed its Islamist proposals and also agreed to hold roundtable discussions with the opposition, which led to substantial concessions from the Islamists to the leftist and liberal (civil) opposition, to avoid the stalemate that has undermined regime consolidation in Egypt. Their joint agreement on the 2014 Constitution, (however incomplete) seems to have set Tunisia on the path toward a "pacted" transition – quite in contrast to Egypt.

Strangely, both countries shared several features that are characteristic of such a mode of transition: a relative balance of political forces (as measured by a narrow margin of electoral victory); a strong and shared desire not to return to the *status quo ante*; a manifest need for major parties to appeal to mean voters if they were to remain in office; and a variety of civil society organizations (especially women's groups in the case of Tunisia) pressuring for a compromise (Kienle, 2012; Pickard, 2014). Tunisia seized the opportunity; Egypt did not.

**Seventh Speculative Observation**

One of the peculiarities of the post-1974 democratizations was the greater frequency of what have been called 'imposed' and 'pacted' transitions (Schmitter and Karl, 1991). Historically, the usual modes for achieving regime transformations were either 'reform' (relatively peaceful popular mobilizations by those excluded from power followed by concessions from ruling elites) or 'revolutions' (violent overthrow by mass insurrection). In short, since 1974 efforts at democratization from below

seemed to be giving way to efforts from above – either from within the incumbent autocracy due to intra-elite factionalism or by negotiation between 'soft-liners' within the *ancien régime* and moderates within the democratic opposition. With a few exceptions – Peru in Latin America, but South Korea and the Philippines in Asia, East Germany and Czechoslovakia in Eastern Europe, South Africa in Sub-Saharan Africa – mobilization from below tended to occur **after** not before a transition had begun. Granted that in virtually no case was there a complete absence of mass popular acclaim for democracy, but it was usually sporadic or ineffectual and the actual transition really began when elites – incumbents with or without challengers – decided to initiate it, admittedly, often in fear of greater future mobilization from below. In retrospect the shift in mode seems reasonable. For one thing, incumbent autocrats had become more capable of physically suppressing revolutionary threats or even of diverting reformist challenges. What they could not prevent has been factionalism within their ranks – especially in situations involving an impending succession to the highest position of executive power. Usually one faction takes the initiative to impose a (carefully controlled) change in regime or to enter into a (cautious and contingent) negotiation with moderate elements in the opposition. What seemed to promote this solution was a growing awareness among conservative supporters of autocracy that democratization in the contemporary context was not as great a threat to their property, privileges or capacity to compete politically as they had thought.

Transitions in the Arab world seem to have reverted to the previous modes of transition. Either it takes mass mobilization by those excluded from the *ancien régime* to which a ruling faction responds by deposing the former leader and introducing substantial reforms while preserving their own positions of power (*vide*

Tunisia, Egypt) or the mobilization from below is resisted violently by the *ancien régime,* but this proves ineffectual and the former rulers are defeated and replaced by a new elite (Libya). The hypothesis was that, under contemporary conditions, the 'reform' and 'revolutionary' modes were less likely to result in a consolidated democracy in the near future. It seems that in the Arab world, this argument is likely to be upheld. In Egypt and Tunisia, the Islamists who have come to power after the fall of the previous autocracy have attempted to control state institutions, including the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary. In Tunisia, the Islamists' hold on power in the Constituent Assembly and the government was extended to control over the writing of the constitution, which has brought about massive debates and criticism, however, led to the relinquishing of absolute power of the Islamists in Tunisia.

Looking at the Egyptian and Tunisian cases of transition – at least initially in the latter case -- it is more enlightening to consider Michael McFaul's (2002) argument concerning post-Soviet transitions in which he analyzes regime change by developing "non-cooperative" models of transition. He places power and ideas at the center of the analysis and disputes the primacy placed by earlier transitologists on negotiation and compromise. Accordingly, a different set of causal paths from authoritarianism to either democracy or dictatorship ensues. He argues that ten years after post-communist transitions in the USSR, the ephemeral distribution of power that favored democrats at the moment of transition helped to produce democracies, while a distribution of power that favored the leaders and functionaries of the *ancien régime* resulted only in a transition from one type of autocracy to another. On the other hand, according to McFaul, a balanced distribution of power resulted in other paths, most likely in relative unstable "hybrid" regimes. The second argument based

on continuity seems to fit Egypt and Yemen, while the third one involving a relative balance of power can be discerned in Tunisia. In Egypt, the military has had the upper hand in the transition process, from the ousting of Mubarak until the ousting of Morsi. The military institution which is authoritarian in nature, and even more so in the case of Egypt where it has dominated political life since 1952, has prevailed as the hegemonic power in the country. The "liberal" opposition is inherently weak, and out of touch with the masses. It can mobilize citizens to demonstrate; however, beyond that it is ineffective and has no political strategy or capacity to present itself as a viable alternative – either to the military or to the Islamists. The Islamists were weakened by the ousting of Mursi and the subsequent crackdown on their other leaders – which leaves political power, legitimate or not, unambiguously in the hands of the military – in a manner not dissimilar to the descendants of the former KGB and Communist Party in present day Russia or Belarus.

In Tunisia, the case is slightly different. There, the power capabilities of the "liberal" opposition, the ruling Islamists and the surviving members of the *ancien régime* are more or less equal divided – and the military is weak and removed from politics. This opens up the prospects for either the consolidation of a hybrid regime according to McFaul's third scenario or a "pacted democratic outcome" according to the earlier transitologists.

In Libya, power has definitively and dramatically shifted from the previous autocracy to something like a "liberal" opposition in the interim. Nevertheless, they were weak, especially in their capacity to provide security and faced major impediments to the creation of strong institutions due to the existence of rival tribes, regional divisions and a strong Islamist opposition. As Joshua Stacher (2015, p. 266) observes: " There is no central authority in Libya, only multiplying militias,

factionalized violence, and political incoherence. The removal of a dictator and the collapse of the state left an arena where militarization and violence will be the *lingua franca* that is likely to propel the next Libyan leader to power" (Stacher, 2015, p. 266).

## A Sort of Conclusion

Area and country specialists have been discussing for some time the 'usual suspects' that were supposed to have been impeding the democratization of MENA. The events that began in Tunisia and have spread (unevenly) throughout the region have perhaps given them some reason to doubt their validity or at least encouraged them to paying more attention to how these alleged constants have become more variable in recent decades.

One could model the seven speculative features of timing and contingency that we have outlined above as variables intervening between the region's suspected structural and cultural constants and the eventual political outcome. We hesitate to claim that they will turn out to be more important, but we do believe that they should be taken into consideration in a more comprehensive analysis of MENA's transitional politics.

Unfortunately, all seven of them point in the direction of a less favorable outcome. We would, therefore, agree with "the less optimistic post-democratization perspective with its focus on the continuities in the apparent changes and interest in understanding the dynamic, but also durable nature of Arab authoritarianism" (Valbjorn, 2012, p. 25). Hence, there is an even greater role for politicians in coming up with the inevitable compromises and hybrid solutions that transform the basic

principles of 'ideal non-existing democracy' into 'real-existing democracy' at a specific time and in a specific place. We hasten to re-assert the basic principle of possibilism: there are no insuperable pre-requisites for democracy, there are only facilitating and impeding factors. Any polity can become democratic, but for some it will take more *virtù* than for others.

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**Notes**

[1] This issue emerged in an especially polemic fashion with the wave of democratization that began in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in 1989. For a debate on this issue, see Philippe Schmitter and Terry Karl, "The Conceptual Travels of Transitologists and Consolidologists." *Slavic Review;* See also Philippe Schmitter and Terry Karl, "From an Iron Curtain of Coercion to a Paper Curtain of Concepts." *Slavic Review*; as well as Valerie Bunce, "Comparative Democratization: Big and Bounded Generalizations, *Comparative Political Studies*.

[2] Which is why so many scholars believed sincerely that viable liberal democracy was a regime only suitable or a very small and privileged subset of countries – about twenty as of 1960 according to Robert Dahl. *Polyarchy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).

[3] In the contemporary political science literature, this is often labeled as "leadership," which in our view has a much more encompassing meaning and implies a reciprocal relation with "followership." *Virtù* is more specifically political (and occasionally not democratic as such) and can be exercised without the consent of others. Even more misleading has been the concept of "charisma" as a transitional device to successful democratization. This type of leader has proven to be disastrous from the point of view of creating viable democratic institutions or practices.

[4] For example, the main slogans of protestors in the wave of Arab uprising were "bread, freedom and social justice."

[5] See for example Khalid Ali, "Qanun al-al-khidma al-madaniya ya'tady 'ala 'amwal al-ta'minat wa al-ma'ashat," [The New Civil Service Law Assaults insurance and Pension Funds] *Al-Shorouk* online.

[6] The present active role that the Arab League has taken with regard to the Syrian crisis is unprecedented and. so far, ineffectual. In the case of Libya, it provided some symbolic support for the intervention of an extra-regional organization, NATO.

[7] Although there are the embarrassing (if relatively minor) exceptions of the "Football War" between El Salvador and Honduras and border skirmishes between Ecuador and Peru. There are also the military interventions by the United States in Grenada and Panama that do not fit the pattern – although the constant threat of a US invasion of Cuba helps to explain why this country has been excluded from most of the regional security efforts and democratic initiatives.

[8] An exception was the role played by foreign communist parties in the first year of the chaotic Portuguese revolution which was controversial within its emerging party system. However, it was relatively modest and proved to be very ephemeral in nature. Much more important (and less visible) was the intervention of the German party foundations: Adenauer, Ebert and Naumann.