Failure of the Arab Uprisings: Authoritarian Relapse and the Status of Democracy and Human Rights

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Abstract

By late 2010, a wave of uprisings had swept across the Arab region, with many countries witnessing renewed uprisings that year. These events prompted a reconsideration of the Arab democratic exception. The uprisings overthrew multiple authoritarian regimes in the region and offered the opportunity for democratic transition. But the transition stalled due to several subjective and objective factors, putting the spotlight back on Arab exceptionalism and leading to a reversion to authoritarianism in the region, with implications for the status of democracy and human rights. The study discusses the impact of the failure of the Arab Uprisings and the democratic transition on authoritarian resurgence, and how it has affected the status of democracy and human rights in the region more than ten years after the first uprisings erupted. The study adopts a descriptive analytical approach and relies on a conceptual framework informed by concepts such as democratic exception, democratic transition, and authoritarian reversal. It concludes that the failure of democratic transitions in the region has led to authoritarian backsliding while giving rise to even more authoritarian and repressive regimes, with adverse implications for democracy and human rights.

Keywords: Democratic Exception; Democratic Transition; Arab Uprisings; Authoritarian Relapse; Human Rights

Introduction

For decades, the Arab region has remained on the side-lines of democratic transitions seen elsewhere in the world. Waves of democratisation have brought about profound changes in the nature of authoritarian political systems and ushered in experiments with democratic political openness.[1] Meanwhile, prospects for transformation remained uncertain in the Arab region, which

was seen as an exception to the waves of democratisation. This prompted researchers[2] to question the reasons for the region's resistance to democracy, giving rise to many approaches that attempt to explain it. When the Arab Uprisings erupted at the end of 2010, researchers believed[3] that they heralded the end of the Arab exception and demonstrated the possibility of a democratic transition in the region after decades of authoritarianism. The Arab Uprisings posed a challenge to authoritarianism, the security grip, and the repression and exclusion practiced by regimes over decades, emphasising the values of change, expression of opinion, legitimacy, and social justice. However, the setbacks faced by the Arab Uprisings, the failure of the uprisings to bring about change, and the reversion to authoritarianism in the region once again put the thesis of the Arab exception under the spotlight.[4]

This study discusses the implications of the failure of the Arab Uprisings and the democratic transition for authoritarian reversion, the reconstitution of old regimes, and the status of democracy and human rights in the region. It starts from a key question: How did the failures of the Arab Uprisings and the faltering of the democratic transition lead to the resurgence of authoritarianism and the reconstitution of old regimes? To answer this, the study asks a number of secondary questions: Did the failure of the Arab Uprisings to achieve their demands and bring change revive theses about exceptionalism in the Arab region? Did the Arab revolutions constitute an opportunity for change or were they a moment for the reproduction of authoritarianism? How has authoritarian reversion affected the status of democracy and human rights? The study assumes that the failure of democratic transitions in the region has led to the resurgence of old regimes and the emergence of authoritarian regimes in the region that pursue even more repressive policies and use more repressive tools, especially in light of wars in the region, internal conflicts, and regional and international interventions.

The study uses a descriptive analytical approach to examine the relationship between the failure of the Arab Uprisings and the democratic transition, and authoritarian reversion in the Arab region, while also considering the impact on democracy and human rights. The descriptive analytical approach relies on the collection of a large amount of data and information to clarify and analyse the relationship between the study variables—in this case, the failure of the democratic transition and authoritarian retrogression. On this basis, questions and hypotheses are formulated and conclusions are drawn from the analysis of the relationship between the variables.[5]

The study is divided into three parts. The first elaborates its conceptual framework, defining and discussing three key concepts: the Arab democratic exception, democratic transition, and authoritarian reversion. The second part deals with the evolution and divergent trajectories of the Arab Uprisings. The third section discusses factors contributing to the failure of the democratic transition and how it led to the reversion to authoritarianism, as well as the impact on democracy and human rights in the Arab region more than ten years after the Arab Uprisings.

This study comes in the context of substantial literature on the Arab Uprisings and the democratic transition and sheds light on a number of questions. Some research discusses the Arab Uprisings in terms of causes and trajectories,[6] while other research looks at process of democratisation in the countries of the region and its determinants.[7] Still other studies examine

factors contributing to the stalling of the democratic transition and the results of it.[8] Research has concluded that the Arab Uprisings that erupted in 2010 held out a historic opportunity for change—an opportunity to initiate the democratic transition and dismantle entrenched authoritarianism in the region. But despite the diverse trajectories taken by the transition after the fall of authoritarian regimes, the democratic transition stalled, for a number of subjective and objective reasons, and the uprisings failed to bring about the desired political and economic change. This study discusses how the failure of democratic transitions in the region more than ten years after the uprisings led to authoritarian backsliding and the reconstitution of old regimes in the region in light of recent developments in the Arab region.

Conceptual Framework

This study discusses the impact of the failure of the Arab Uprisings on authoritarian reversion and the reconstitution of authoritarian regimes, as well as the status of democracy and human rights in the Arab region. In its analysis of the central issue, the study is informed by the concepts of democratisation and the Arab democratic exception, democratic transition, authoritarian reversion, and hybrid political systems.

Waves of democratisation and Arab Exceptionalism
In his *The Third Wave*, Samuel Huntington identifies three waves of democratisation. The first wave theoretically began with the French and American revolutions, but democratic institutions only truly emerged in the nineteenth century when the countries of Europe and the Americas extended the franchise to women and other citizens and developed electoral and oversight systems. The second wave began after the Second World War, when the Allied victory spurred the creation of democratic institutions in West Germany, Italy, Austria, Japan, and Korea. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Turkey and Greece began to democratise, along with Brazil and Costa Rica in Latin America.[9] On 25 April 1974, a coup in Portugal ended the rule of dictator Marcelo Caetano amid popular support, marking the beginning of the third wave of democratisation. In the next fifteen years, democracies supplanted totalitarian and authoritarian regimes in some thirty countries in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. In other countries, pro-democracy movements gained new ground and legitimacy, and despite some resistance, setbacks, and backlashes, the movement towards democracy grew into a global tide and achieved many victories.[10] Arab countries, however, remained immune to all three democratic waves, leading some observers to speak of an Arab democratic exception. Compared to other regions of the world such as East Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa, Arab countries have made only limited progress towards democracy.[11]

Much of literature on democratisation in the 1990s attributed Arab exceptionalism to cultural factors such as a purported structural dysfunction inherent to Islam and authoritarian patriarchal Arab culture, which ultimately shapes the culture of individuals. This was later used by the West and the United States to intervene in the region—as in Iraq in 2003—on the pretext of exporting

democracy.[12] In contrast to such unidirectional theories, Burhan Ghalioun argues that several geopolitical, economic, social, and international factors have influenced the region's democratic transition. Although there is certainly a place for culture in the interpretation of the reality of political life, even if culture is not a decisive factor in the establishment of authoritarian regimes, the focus should be on the interplay of geopolitical, cultural, economic and social factors. This framework more rigorously evaluates the dire Arab political situation rather than pitting one factor against another and constitutes a better approach to understanding the issue of democracy in Arab countries, which must be viewed as an ongoing historical process of construction, destruction, and reconstitution that is more complex than single-factor theories assume.[13]

In this context, there are many approaches that explain the democratic lapse in the Arab region. Some scholars believe that coercive agencies and their capacity for repression are the main reason for the persistence of authoritarian regimes, due to a number of factors. These agencies receive the bulk of financial resources, and security institutions enjoy international support because they guarantee the interests of international powers in the region; moreover, such agencies exhibit minimal institutionalisation and tend to operate on the basis of patronage and clientelism.[14] Other researchers attribute the democratic impasse to oil wealth, which allows oil states to consolidate their authority. Oil revenues render the collection of taxes, and in turn, accountability to citizens, moot. The state uses oil revenues to provide support for broad segments of the population, promoting loyalty and acquiescence to the existing order and preventing the formation of independent forces demanding political rights.[15] Still other scholars attribute the absence of democracy in the region to the prevailing culture, in which paternalism pervades social relations and extends to the political system. These scholars point the finger largely at Islam, as the principal component of culture in the Middle East and the Arab region, asserting that the values of Islam do not foster democracy and make no distinction between the religious community and the polity. This trend has drawn much criticism as an Orientalist, ethnocentric perspective that assumes the superiority of the Western model and views other peoples as inferior.[16] A fourth approach holds that the absence of democracy is the result of the support of major international powers for authoritarian regimes in the region. It argues that American policy had a particularly pernicious impact during the Cold War, as the US supported dictators around the world, such as Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in Iran, in order to keep their countries from falling into the communist orbit; a similar logic applies to the Arab region and the Middle East. For years, various US administrations have provided grants and assistance to authoritarian regimes due to the concentration of oil and gas wealth in the Arab region, its strategic location, and the presence of Israel, all of which make the region a key interest for the major powers and an arena of conflict between them. International forces' material and moral backing for the authoritarian client regimes that serve their interests has precluded the establishment of democratic systems.[17]

Democratic transition
In its broadest sense, the democratic transition refers to the transition from an undemocratic system of government to a democratic one; it is the process through which the undemocratic system is

dismantled and a new democratic order is built. The process touches on components of the political system such as the constitutional and legal structure, institutions, and political processes. The democratic transition is a time of conflicts, bargaining, and negotiations between power centres.[18] According to Paul Lewis, the democratic transition is a phase of regime change that begins when totalitarian autocracies begin to crumble, new constitutions and democratic structures are put in place, and political elites adjust their behaviour to conform to the established rules of democracy.[19] Ali al-Din Hilal posits that the democratic transition represents a fundamental transformation in the nature of the political order and in the state's relationship with society. It is therefore a foundational stage that affects the form and characteristics of the new system and casts a shadow over the unfolding trajectory of the system. The democratic transition refers to a set of processes that achieve the political transition from authoritarian to democratic government. It is a two-dimensional process, involving both culture and institutions. Culturally, the democratic transition means deepening the principle of citizenship and equality of rights, freedoms, and duties and expanding the circle of people covered by them. The institutional dimension refers to the incorporation of multiparty practices and institutional competitiveness in the body politic, which entails constitutional and organisational amendments, the redistribution of power and influence in society, and the expansion of participation in the political system. In other words, the transition to democracy involves the introduction of competitive political concepts and practices on an institutional basis.[20]

Practically speaking, the term 'democratic transition' refers to the stage after the fall of the authoritarian regime; it begins when new figures come to power and they start to establish a new political system, including by drafting a constitution and legislation to govern political life and by holding parliamentary and presidential elections. The transition ends when the constitutional structure undergirding the state authorities is completed, if this structure persists and stabilises. In this case, the process of strengthening democracy begins, meaning that democratic institutions are consolidated and become part of the political culture and the public order. However, if the institutional structure established during the transition does not stabilise, a second transition may begin or the old regime may return, in what is known as authoritarian reversion or neo-authoritarianism.[21]

Although researchers differ on the definition of the stages of the transition to democracy, three stages can be identified. The first is the collapse of the authoritarian system, which marks the beginning of the process of transitioning to a new system. During this stage, there are conflicts between hardliners clinging to the old system and moderates who wish to reform the system. Second is the stage of democratisation. At this time, there is heightened potential for backsliding and the return of an even more authoritarian order than that of the old regime, meaning that this phase will determine the fate of the transition process as a whole. In this stage, we see concessions from the ruling leadership and escalating demands for reform, as well as a shift to liberalism and the expansion of individual freedoms, heralding the transition from the authoritarian system to the democratic system. The third stage is that of democratic consolidation, when the institutions of the old authoritarian regime are eliminated and replaced by new institutions; a consensus prevails

among political actors that democracy is the optimal system and is necessary for the perpetuation of the new order. Researchers concur that the most important—and most dangerous—of the three stages is the second because of the increased likelihood of political setbacks due to the hybrid structure of the political system. If the institutional structure built during this stage is unstable, a second transition process may begin or the old order may return in a more developed form, in what is known as authoritarian reversion or neo-authoritarianism.[22]

Authoritarian reversion and hybrid regimes

Numerous countries worldwide have witnessed a democratic transition. While some of them have successfully consolidated their democracies, in others, stable, entrenched democratic systems were not established. Instead, these countries witnessed authoritarian reversals and the emergence of hybrid regimes, as is the case in the Arab region, Africa, some Latin American countries, and the states of the former Soviet Union. These countries did not fully democratise.[23]

Hybrid regimes are those that combine aspects of democracy and authoritarianism. They embarked on democratisation with formal procedures and did not shore up the values and essence of democracy. As a result, democratisation entailed the transition from traditional authoritarianism to competitive authoritarianism while leaving the nature of authority intact.[24] These are mixed regimes built on a political structure that adheres to formal democratic procedures and institutions, but retains its authoritarian structure.[25] Hybrid regimes adopt procedural democracy—competitive elections, for example—while maintaining strong authoritarian overtones. Though such regimes may enjoy some democratic openness and periodic elections, this coexists with residue of the authoritarian past, seen in interference in the electoral process and election rigging, in addition to the strong influence of the military establishment. The hybrid quality varies from one regime to another depending on how the governing authority intervenes in the democratisation process and the role it plays.[26]

In order to survive and impose its authority, the hybrid regime may rely on internal sources of power. For example, the regime may control primary resources that serve as a source of income and build the army's military doctrine on a functional basis to serve its interests, in addition to establishing internal security services that suppress and deter opponents. These sources of power are important because they are an effective tool for recruiting supporters and punishing opponents. The softer the power deployed—bureaucratic and economic means, for example—the less costly it is to confront opposition.[27] Some regimes may resort to false sources of power. They may claim to be facing an external threat, which distracts attention from domestic issues. Or they may distract citizens with various issues that change their priorities, for example, by imposing economic conditions that lead citizens to focus on daily life or by fabricating an internal security threat and pledging to fight it; in light of the invented threat, talk about radical changes in the context of democratisation becomes unpalatable. In addition, hybrid regimes rely on some democratic practices as a source of legitimacy, especially elections, which gives them the strength to persist.[28]

Theoretical analyses differ as to whether hybrid regimes represent a transitional stage between authoritarianism and democracy, or an end point of failed democratisation efforts. Proponents of the first thesis see hybrid regimes as political systems that democratisation has endowed with many

manifestations of democracy—first and foremost, competitive elections—but without this culminating in a qualitative democracy. This thesis holds that democratisation efforts are still underway. The second analysis posits that hybrid regimes are an end point in the democratic transition, marking a failure of democratisation. They do not, then, represent a transition to democracy, but rather an upgrading of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes that have been forced by internal and external circumstances to take political and legal steps towards a very specific kind of democracy, one in which competitive elections preserve the existing order rather than democratically replacing the regime.[29]

The Arab Uprisings and Democratic Exceptionalism

The wave of protests witnessed in the Arab region since late 2010, which I call 'the Arab Uprisings', began in Tunisia and then spread to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and, to a lesser extent, other Arab countries. The sacrifice of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia was the spark igniting a wave of uprisings that brought down the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Less than a month after the fall of Ben Ali, protesters toppled Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who stepped down after thirty years in power. In Yemen, where power was transferred after a multi-stage negotiating process, President Abdullah Saleh ended his rule in February 2012 after thirty-three years in power. However, the situation was relatively unstable as the independence movement gained steam in the south and sectarian tensions escalated. Libya saw the fall of the Qaddafi regime in August 2011 and succeeded in holding free elections with high voter turnout in July 2012. Importantly, the Arab revolutions succeeded in breaking the barrier of fear, raised the possibility of change, and empowered the popular will.[30]

In 2018, protests erupted anew, marking a second wave of uprisings in Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria, and Sudan. These uprisings raised many questions about the Arab democratic exception and the possibility of change and democratisation in the region given the dire political, economic, and social reality.[31] They also reflected widespread political rejection of authoritarian regimes. Despite the difference between the Arab regimes, they share many characteristics; the demands advanced by protests were accordingly similar, including political freedoms, democracy, and social justice. In other words, the protesters demanded a new social contract between the citizen and the state, demanding to be seen as partners in governance and a source of legitimacy rather than as a security risk to the regime. The response of regimes was also quite similar: they immediately resorted to violence and repression.[32] Civic activity and social movements gained in strength in the region during this period. Projects and initiatives swept through Arab cities, broke the barrier of fear imposed by the security services, and turned Arab cities into daily arenas of protest, where citizens asserted the right to participation and claimed civil, political, and economic rights and beyond.[33]

Trajectories of the Arab Uprisings
More than ten years after the Arab Uprisings, the Arab region seems to be in crisis. The democratic transition is most countries has failed, as states like Syria, Yemen, Libya and Sudan have fallen

into civil and/or regional wars and Egypt and Tunisia have seen the rise of dictatorships that are no less authoritarian and, indeed, less observant of human rights than the old regimes. This has been reflected in the re-evaluation of attitudes and views of the Arab Uprisings and of the question of the Arab democratic exception.

The Arab revolutions took different paths, all plagued by tension and conflicts. In some countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, limited movements were quickly contained by the ruling elite thanks to the availability of financial resources and privileges used by the regimes to buy citizens' loyalty in exchange for the ceding of reforms and political rights. In contrast, protests were relatively strong in Bahrain, where they were suppressed by force and intervention by the Gulf Cooperation Council. Other countries, like Morocco, Algeria, and Jordan, defused revolutions by implementing political and constitutional reforms.[34]

In Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the outcome was catastrophic. In Libya, revolutionary elites inherited a country without institutions, a constitution, or experience with party politics and civic life, and all this amidst a security vacuum in which militias controlled cities and neighbourhoods. As for Syria, it saw an armed confrontation between the regime and the opposition involving multiple actors with divergent, conflicting interests that made Syria an arena for proxy wars. In Yemen, the uprisings ended in armed conflicts and a haphazard path laid by tribal and sectarian conflicts, dominated by armed militias coupled with regional interventions. The revolution in Egypt was met with a counterrevolution, as the military establishment exploited the Muslim Brotherhood's mismanagement of the political and social situation to seize power and end the democratic transition. In Tunisia, the democratic transition initially succeeded, overcoming differences between elites and political forces. This was helped by a number of factors, such as the role of the Tunisian General Labour Union, reconciliation between Islamist and secular currents, and the non-interference of the Tunisian military in the political process, all of which resulted in the formation of a consensus and the peaceful rotation of power. However, with the coming to power of Kais Saied, the democratic process faltered following the enactment of several decrees that concentrated power in the hands of the president and marginalised the opposition, parliament, and all state institutions. Protests in Iraq and Lebanon faced repression and violence from the authorities and did not succeed in achieving real demands, with both countries experiencing a political crisis that lasted for at least a year.[35] As for Sudan, it is currently undergoing an armed struggle for power.[36]

The period from 2010 to 2013 was one of political uncertainty for the Arab revolutions, marked by a security vacuum, economic difficulties, and social protests in Egypt, Libya, and to some extent, Yemen. That phase began in Sudan in 2018, and in Iraq and Lebanon in 2019. There was a search for a real, effective political model, but negotiations between conflicting political forces failed to agree on the rules of the democratic political game. After 2014, military elites rose to power in Egypt and Libya, giving more concrete form to the forces of counterrevolution and the deep state. The best description of this stage is that it was a time of the decline of revolutionary forces against the rise of the principle of civil war, either as an inevitable outcome, in the case of Libya and Yemen, or as a threat used for intimidation and justification, as in Egypt.[37]

After 2017, the so-called Arab Spring turned into a full-fledged autumn; rather than democratic transition, civil war or resurgent authoritarianism seemed to be the only options on offer for the Arab revolutions. Authoritarianism dominated the political process, and non-state militias such as al-Qaeda and the Houthis emerged in Yemen, as the country was transformed into an arena for international and regional conflict.[38] With renewed protests in a number of countries in 2018, Sudan found itself in a civilian-military power struggle, which eventually devolved into an internal armed power struggle.[39] Protests in Iraq and Lebanon have abated, failing to produce real gains.[40]

The different trajectories of Arab political systems were determined by internal and external factors specific to each country, depending on the different contexts and interactions between various elements of each system, and the divergent nature of power and social and economic factors. Nevertheless, several general conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the toppling of the head of the regime does not usher in democracy. Many countries, such as Libya, overthrew the regime leader and then collapsed into civil war, or, like Egypt, witnessed a counterrevolution. This means that democracy is not merely the absence of tyranny, but it also entails the establishment of political institutions, a strong civil society, and democratic procedures. Secondly, regular elections absent genuine democratic content and real consensus makes it difficult to sustain and perpetuate democracy. The conditions for a democratic transition are different from those of democratic stability, as demonstrated by Tunisia. Thirdly, the role of external actors cannot be ignored. For decades, international powers have played a key role in obstructing democracy in the region, and they continue to play this role in order to protect their interests first and foremost. Fourthly, the role of leadership and the political project and their impact on the effectiveness of protests and the achievement of demands cannot be ignored, especially in sectarian societies such as Iraq and Lebanon.[41]

Authoritarian Reversion and the Status of Democracy and Human Rights

More than ten years after the Arab Uprisings and the fall of authoritarian symbols in many Arab countries, there are few signs on the political landscape of major shifts towards democratisation in the institutional, economic, social, and cultural structure of Arab societies. Democratic transitions in the region have stalled, leading to the resurgence of hybrid authoritarian regimes. Although popular movements were able to bring down the heads of authoritarian regimes, they could not topple the regimes themselves. Eradicating traditional authoritarian structures left behind by previous regimes was the most important challenge after the Arab Uprisings.

Authoritarian regimes in the Arab region have proven extremely resilient in dealing with uprisings and rebuilding themselves in various ways to maintain their hold on power and control over decision-making. This is the predictable outcome of preventing any serious development of state institutions other than the security establishment, thus ensuring that any vacuum created by popular protests would be filled by the only institution capable of acting: the security establishment. This situation poses the problem of authoritarian resilience: while regimes in the region are generally fragile and weak, they nevertheless possess a superior repressive capacity.[42]

Hybrid Arab regimes, both historical and contemporary, share several key qualities: a strong security apparatus; a reliance on repression to ensure regime stability and continuity; the adoption of constitutional amendments that allow for party and electoral pluralism, the peaceful rotation of power, and formal competitiveness; state intervention in all areas of political, economic, and social life; an outsized role for the military establishment; the exercise of state control over the economy through selected elites and the denial of opportunities to ordinary citizens; and finally, a limited, narrow role for civil society and the suppression of dissent. These features were reasserted and bolstered after the Arab Uprisings faltered and authoritarianism returned. In fact, Arab regimes have turned a new page, abandoning some old features and tools. Perhaps most obviously, spaces previously open to the political opposition have been shut down, and the ceiling of media freedoms has been lowered; the iron grip on political forces and civil society is even tighter, and little regard is shown for international agendas and the statements and classifications of human rights and humanitarian organisations. The failure of the Arab Uprisings thus did not result in mere authoritarian backsliding, but rather gave rise to a set of even more draconian regimes and another set of failed,[43] unstable states dominated by conflicts and wars.[44]

Factors Contributing to the Failure of the Arab Uprisings
The Arab countries that witnessed protests in the two waves of the Arab Uprisings confronted several challenges that influenced the democratic transition and led to the failure to achieve their demands and act effectively. Several factors are key in this regard.

The deep state:[45] Remnants of authoritarian regimes played a key role in obstructing the democratic transition. The uprisings ran up against strong, deep-rooted authoritarian structures determined to defend their privileges. At the same time, none of the countries of the region has experienced real democracy. They have also been subject to authoritarian rulers who have established the structures and elements of authoritarianism and tyranny through political, legal, security, economic, cultural, and religious mechanisms. Over the decades, those systems produced a distorted politics that enshrined authoritarian structures. Regimes have employed mechanisms that have further entrenched authoritarianism and corruption, establishing multiple security services, bolstering regime survival, and using administrative and security procedures and laws to tighten control over opposition organisations and forces and civil society, making the ruler the main player and controller of the political game. These regimes also doled out economic and political privileges to buy political loyalty, thereby containing broad swathes of the intelligentsia by various means. All of this has been coupled with extensive networks of corruption and an official media whose mission is to praise the leader, his wisdom, and his achievements. Additionally, these regimes effectively weaponised the Islamic threat in their relationship with Western powers. All these methods enabled Arab regimes to establish police states able to crush all opponents and achieve a kind of authoritarian political stability. Dealing with this decades-long history of authoritarian structures and corruption is accordingly a chief challenge in the post-revolutionary stage following the overthrow of regime heads.[46]

The dilemma of state-building and establishing democracy: The dilemma of state weakness and collapse posed a fundamental challenge to democratisation in the Arab region. The chances of establishing a democratic system are greater when there is a well-established nation state that enjoys legitimacy and control over its territory through its monopoly on the legitimate use of force. This is especially a problem in Libya and Yemen, where the state is collapsing, demonstrated in its inability to control state levers and resources, combined with a weak army and security establishment, resulting in chaos and unrest. In Libya, because of the policies pursued by the Qaddafi regime for decades, the state apparatus and institutions began to disintegrate even before the collapse of the regime; and the ruling authority, represented by the transitional institutions, was unable to impose its control over the state's territory given the many divisions. Yemen, after the end of the National Dialogue Initiative in early 2014, faced the even greater challenge of implementing the provisions of the document given the rising intensity of internal armed conflicts. As for Iraq and Lebanon, the state is dominated by sectarian divisions that are employed and manipulated for political gain, hindering any real attempt at reform and change.[47]

While the greatest challenge in Libya and Yemen was to build the nation state itself on new foundations, both the Egyptian and Tunisian states, despite their long-standing durability, are flabby, bloated, and weak, making the state apparatus unable to function effectively and efficiently. This fragility was exacerbated by the falls of the two countries' regime heads. Rebuilding and reforming the state is thus a requirement for democratisation.[48]

The role of the military establishment: The political role of the military establishment, civilian-military relations, and the military's role in managing the process of democratisation in the Arab region after the uprisings was a major challenge. Given the different experiences of Arab states, the role of the military establishment and its engagement with democratisation varied and produced different results. Some of the literature notes that in successful democratic transitions in which the army plays a role, it is limited to preparing for real elections during the transition or handing over power to civilians to manage the transitional period; in these cases, politicians do not politicise the army either by reaching an understanding with it or by using it to bolster their own camp and call for a coup against elected institutions.[49] The Arab protests demonstrate the pivotal role of the military establishment in the success of democratic transition. In Tunisia, the army's refusal to suppress protesters, or later to interfere in the political process, allowed Tunisia to successfully take initial steps towards democratisation. The fragmentation of the army in Yemen plunged the country into a civil war that has resulted in state failure, while army intervention in Syria to crack down on demonstrators transformed the country into an arena for local, regional, and international fighting. In Egypt, the military exploited the polarisation of political forces and the lack of consciousness of political elites to seize power, establishing a new authoritarianism and ushering in the return of the deep state.[50] In Sudan, a power struggle between civilians and the military emerged after the 2018 protests and the removal of Bashir from power. Ultimately, the military establishment, as well as other paramilitaries, took control of the levers of government, leading

the country into an internal war over power that thwarted attempts and opportunities for democratisation.[51]

Absence of leadership and state-building projects: Of course, the role of opposition political elites in exposing the corruption and authoritarianism of rulers—aided by the information revolution, especially social media networks—cannot be overlooked. But in the face of developments subsequent to the fall of the head of the regime, these elites seemed unable to take the lead and fill the vacuum. Quite simply, they were ill-equipped to do so, and they remained, in one way or another, part of the landscape created by the old regime, unable to form a real opposition to its policies. The Muslim Brotherhood, as a reformist movement and one of the most influential forces in the Egyptian arena, may have had a plan for mobilising the masses, but it lacked a state-building project. The same is true of secular and leftist forces. The political impotence of elites after the falls of the regimes was reflected most concretely in the lack of a revolutionary project. On the contrary, partisan and factional projects and agendas emerged after the resounding falls. Elites did not rise to the moment, and the revolution had no leadership or unified programme or project. Moreover, pressing issues related to the management of the transitional period were ignored, as was the role of various political forces and the military establishment.[52]

The weakness of political parties and civil society: The weakness, fragmentation, and fragility of civil political forces and parties is a chief factor that explains the political vacuum in some countries. In Egypt, for example, it allowed for the rise of political Islam, while in Iraq and Lebanon it precluded a consensus on central issues, which in turn disrupted the political process. Post-revolution parties have failed to present themselves as strong political alternatives, for several reasons, including the fragmentation and weakness of parties, their inability to form strong political alliances and coalitions, and the weakness of their social bases, which are concentrated in narrow circles in capitals and major cities due to the elitism of their discourse and ideology.[53]

With regard to civil society, some of the democratisation literature emphasises its prominent role in supporting and consolidating democracy. In Arab countries, however, civil society forces and organisations are weak, despite the existence of civic associations, trade unions, human rights organisations, and social movements. Although some of these groups played important roles during the protests, they were unable to sustain this role. While civil society organisations proliferated in Yemen after the uprising, they played only a marginal, limited role in the democratic transition due to the disruption of the process and political, tribal, and sectarian divisions. In Libya, Qaddafi's policies hindered the emergence or formation of genuine civil society organisations. Although the number of civilian organisations increased after Qaddafi, their role remained limited due to their recency and the disintegration of state institutions. Conversely, civil society in Tunisia played a strong, effective role and helped to shape and support consensus.[54]

External factors: Historically, Western democracies have played a different role in supporting democracy in the Arab region than in southern and eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For decades, external powers have had a pernicious influence on democratisation, as international powers supported authoritarian regimes in the region to secure their interests and ensure the flow of oil. Regional and international powers played a clear role in managing the 2011 uprisings and steering the transitions towards the reproduction of absolutist and authoritarian old regimes or muddying the domestic waters. In Libya, the regime could not have been toppled without external assistance, but the country quickly turned into an arena for multiple regional and international powers vying for influence. In Yemen, regional parties sponsored an internal national dialogue (the Gulf Initiative) that ended with the preservation of the old ruling party, leading the Houthis to carry out a coup against the outcome of the dialogue that plunged the country into a grinding war. In Egypt, the counterrevolution would not have succeeded without the generous support of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. As for Syria, its revolution morphed into a civil war due to the direct military intervention of regional and international parties. In Bahrain, the protest movement was aborted by direct Saudi intervention, which saw it as an extension of Iranian influence. The initial success of the Tunisian revolution is perhaps attributable to the country's distance from the rivalries of relatively large countries, despite the attempt of regional powers to influence the political scene.[55]

In addition to these challenges, democratisation in the region faced economic hurdles that threatened state stability and affected the transitional process. States strained under economic fragility and governments' inability to meet the demands of the people. Democratisation in the region was tied up with a set of structural and exogenous variables and challenges that thwarted the success of the democratic transition and fostered the survival of the old elites, who became even more brutal and perpetuated the same conditions that led to the revolutions. The region is currently witnessing a political closure, manifested most prominently in the exclusion of the opposition and new elites, the restriction of the public sphere and media space, and the violation of human rights, in addition to a complicated economic situation.[56]

Democracy indices

Various accoutrements of democracy were seen in Arab region after the uprisings, including the peaceful rotation of power through elections, party pluralism, the separation of powers, judicial independence, freedom of opinion and the media, and the establishment of civil society organisations. But these were merely formal and ineffective manifestations of democracy and did not represent the values of democracy and pluralism. More than one country has since held a series of elections, the dominant feature of which has been state interference in the electoral process, the lack of electoral integrity, the harnessing of the media to serve the counterrevolution, the exclusion and embattlement of opponents, and the issuance of mass death sentences against opponents, all amid the systematic violation of press freedom and human rights.[57]

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was ranked the lowest of all the regions in the 2021 Democracy Index, with five out of twenty countries at the bottom of the rankings.[58] The report

classifies seventeen of the twenty Arab countries covered as authoritarian regimes. The index highlights Tunisia as an example of declining democracy in the region, classifying it as a 'hybrid system', after formerly labelling it as a 'flawed democracy', which is higher. The index describes Tunisia as the principal victim in MENA in 2021, ranking the country seventy-fifth globally, down from fifty-fourth in 2020, saying that hopes for the continuation of the democratic transition in Tunisia that began with the Arab uprisings in 2010 have been dashed.[59] The index highlights the poor state of democracy in the region. MENA rates the lowest among all regions covered by the report, scoring 3.34 in 2022, down from 3.41 points in 2021.[60]

The state of human rights

The human rights situation in the Arab region has deteriorated over the past decade. Regimes have deliberately suppressed and marginalised opposition, dissenting opinion, and minorities; targeted journalists; and cracked down on any call for peaceful action or demonstrations. In the Gulf, where the picture is virtually uniform, any calls for reform are suppressed, there are no elections, and women are marginalised, despite the cosmetic reforms instituted by some countries; partisan activity is also prohibited in addition to other authoritarian practices.[61] In most Arab countries, more restrictions have been imposed on fundamental rights and freedoms, especially freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association. In numerous countries, the authorities have severely restricted the right of individuals to peacefully demonstrate, organise peaceful protests, and express themselves online. Peaceful activists, human rights defenders, and journalists have been arrested and prosecuted on vague charges[62] and under provisions of the Penal Code that criminalise the discussion of public affairs or criticism of public authorities.[63]

In its 2022 Freedom in the World report, Freedom House stated that most of the declines in civil liberties and political rights over the past decade have been in MENA, where dictators continue to systematically dismantle democracy to ensure their indefinite hold on power, using rigged elections, surveillance, violence, and corruption to crush any opposition and suppress any expression of opinion. In the same vein, non-state militias and armed groups, supported by these dictators, pose a growing threat to freedom, quelling protests and attacking civilians simply for speaking out. Freedom of thought itself is also in peril, with the authorities imposing severe censorship, targeting dissenting voices in various fields, and initiating campaigns to mislead the public and smear opponents. Economic crises are eroding rights as well, as weak growth, high debt, lack of opportunity, corruption, and income inequality allow authoritarianism to spread. Tunisia is singled out in the report after witnessing a major setback in freedoms and democracy. Tunisia's score fell eight points in 2022 (from sixty-four to fifty-six), the largest decline in MENA. It dropped six points in the political rights indicator due to the legal and constitutional changes introduced by Tunisian President Kais Saied to weaken his opponents and two points in the civil liberties indicator due to Saied's restriction of freedom of expression and the press and his decree weakening the judiciary and undermining its independence. Among Arab countries, Tunisia was nevertheless still ranked first, followed by Lebanon; Kuwait ranked first in the Gulf, and Syria came last with a score of one point.[64]

Conclusion

More than ten years ago, a wave of uprisings swept across the Arab region, starting in Tunisia before spreading to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and to a lesser extent, other countries. The wave surged anew in 2018 in Iraq and Lebanon, and later Sudan and Algeria. These uprisings toppled the heads of authoritarian regimes in the region and offered a historic opportunity for change and democratic transition in the region, as well as an opportunity to refute the notion of an Arab democratic exception. Due to several factors, however, the uprisings and democratic transition encountered difficulties that thwarted the transition and political and economic change in the region.

In light of this, this study discusses how the failure of the uprisings and the stalled democratic transition in the region has led to authoritarian backsliding and the reconstitution of old regimes, and it looks at the impact on the status of democracy and human rights more than a decade after the uprisings. The study is divided into three parts. The first lays out the conceptual framework, informed by three main concepts; waves of democratisation and the Arab democratic exception; democratisation; and authoritarian reversion and hybrid regimes. The second part discusses the evolution and trajectories of the Arab Uprisings, while the third section examines the implications for democracy and human rights of the stalled democratic transition and authoritarian reversion in the region.

This study concludes that the democratic transition in the region faltered due to several factors, including the role of the deep state and remnants of authoritarian regimes, the double challenge of simultaneously building the state and democracy, the role of the military establishment in the region, the lack of leadership and a unifying project, and finally the weakness of political parties and civil society. The study further concludes that more than ten years after the Arab uprisings, the region is regressing towards more authoritarian and violent regimes, civil wars, armed conflicts, humanitarian crises, refugee crises, and economic problems. Democracy and human rights are also on the decline, with various global indices identifying the region as the worst in the world in this regard. This has only reaffirmed and underscored the Arab democratic exception.

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