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Explaining (and re-explaining) political change in the Middle East during the Arab Spring: trajectories of democratization and of authoritarianism in the Maghreb

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After the 2011 Arab Spring, a pressing concern is to understand why some authoritarian regimes remain in power while others fall when confronted with similar difficulties. Earlier representations of the success of authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa generated common misperceptions concerning politically effective behaviour in the region. These views, shared by local autocrats and international actors alike, led them to propose ad hoc policy reorientations in response to a contagion of popular uprisings. In their turn, these policy responses directly contributed to the failure of authoritarianism and the production of democratic revolutions in several countries of the region. Such revolutionary options, although structured by the (lack of) opportunities for contestation present in each polity, are not predicable events as they depend on elite mis-assessments of the situation to be effective (as in Tunisia, Libya). Reciprocally, when reform pathways are made available by authoritarian regimes, contestation can be channelled into non-revolutionary political action (as in Morocco, Algeria).

Keywords: revolution; democratic transition; understanding; causality; Middle East; authoritarian politics

This analysis addresses the troublesome issue of political stability and change in the authoritarian systems of the contemporary Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It has often been said that it is illusory to position a unitary ‘Middle East’ as the object of political analysis. Be that as it may, recent events in the region highlighted a well-known trend in democratization studies, namely a regional dynamics for democratic change. In other words, there appears to have been a ‘contagion effect’ linked to shared socio-economic and political plights in the region. This phenomenon of contagion applies to both patterns of anti-regime mobilization and methods of regime repression. At the time of writing, it does not unambiguously apply to the new models of political governance.
adopted in the region, even though transitional authorities in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya have all explicitly advocated electoral democracy in their country.

While the similarities in anti-regime protests following the Tunisian revolution have already been highlighted, the patterns of authoritarian resilience in the post-Arab Spring context are now also beginning to be considered. At the end of 2011, one of the most common questions among policy-makers and in the media remains: why do some authoritarian regimes remain in power while others fall when confronted with similar difficulties? A less dramatic but highly relevant question for domestic politics and foreign policy is to query how these different situations are obtained. In this article, a two-part answer is proposed that stresses the relevance of continuities in modes of authoritarian governance, whilst indicating that the specific dynamics of revolutionary episodes in individual countries are best understood not by reference to pre-existing methods of authoritarian success.

Based on a comparison of the political situation in four North African countries – Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco – the article indicates that retaining a plurality of explanatory frameworks may be the best option to account for change and stability in the region. I broadly talk about an ‘Arab Spring’ even though my focus is on North Africa to emphasize the dynamics of contestation that have been most effective after the fall of the Tunisian regime. Clearly this Tunisian ‘ideal type’ cannot describe all the political transformations that occurred in the MENA in 2011. This idealized representation of democratic change constitutes nonetheless a useful normative thread between the different revolts connected to this ‘Spring’. Considering the causes of failure of the Tunisia and Libyan regimes in connection to the semi-democratic evolution of the Moroccan and Algerian regimes the article makes a distinction between, on the one hand, the successes and failures of authoritarianism in situations of institutionalized politics and, on the other hand, those obtained in periods of de-institutionalization (revolution). Whilst the analytical remarks detailing the causal mechanisms of revolutions are generic to the field of political science, my argument is constructed from the specific dynamics observed in the contemporary authoritarian regimes of North Africa.

For analytical purposes, I consider democratic revolutions to be the period of popular uprising that forces an authoritarian regime to make massive concessions or to collapse – as witnessed in 2011 in Tunisia, Libya, and far more tentatively in Egypt (as the military leadership associated with the old regime still yields considerable political influence and power at the time of writing). This working definition does not concentrate on the longer-term political and/or socio-economic implications of regime change (as do most exhaustive accounts of revolutions and democratic transitions) but focuses instead on the causal dynamics of the initial regime change. Thus, more than a substantive notion of revolution, what is described here is a revolutionary form of regime change. In this respect, what characterizes the democratic revolutions of the Arab Spring and differentiates them from ‘traditional’ democratic transitions and revolutions is that, unlike the
former, they are unplanned, spontaneous political transitions and, unlike the latter, they are not ideologically and politically organized. Seen in this light, the democratic revolutions of the Arab Spring challenge some common assumptions about the role of a political ‘vanguard’ (deemed to be Islamist in the Middle East) in revolutions, and about the role of dialog between opposition movements and authoritarian reformers in democratic transitions. As with earlier revolutionary and democratic transformations, democratic revolutions can occur at different points on a spectrum of violence and of international involvement (for example, Tunisia versus Libya).

In the first section I ask how far the unexpected character of such political changes in the Middle East is a consequence of common misrepresentations of authoritarian stability in the region. The second section attempts to retrieve insights from the more structural accounts of authoritarianism in the four countries of the Maghreb. I emphasize the relevance of the mechanisms that produce, in Daniel Brumberg’s terms, ‘dissonant’ and ‘harmonic’ political systems, for the conditions of possibility of effective protests in these polities. By contrast, the third section stresses the ‘predicable unpredictability’, for want of a better term, of democratic revolutions. It indicates how the misperceptions of a revolutionary potential and of revolutionary dynamics by policy-makers (and analysts), at home (in the MENA) and abroad (in the ‘Western’ policy community), are themselves a significant causal factor in these revolutions. The mistaken beliefs of the Tunisian regime that old methods of authoritarian control would work as well as they had before and, after the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, the assessment by the international community that a popular uprising could easily topple an authoritarian regime like the one in Libya directly shaped the contours of the Arab Spring.

Over-stating the authoritarian (Arab) state

To frame usefully the existing literature on political stability in the Middle East and North Africa and its failure to anticipate regime change, it is necessary to begin by considering the foundations of narratives on authoritarianism in the region. By using the term narrative, I wish to stress a discursive process that contributes to ‘naturalize’ the causes of authoritarianism found in various countries and make them appear largely unproblematic in generic accounts of politics in the region. Both structure- and agency-based explanations of politics in the MENA have detailed the causal mechanisms sustaining the institutional status quo, usually at the expense of a consideration of non-institutionalized mechanisms of change. Such a bias in analyses of the region was not only understandable but also meaningful in a context where stasis was the over-bearing characteristic of these polities. A propensity of the mainstream MENA literature to assume long-term institutional stability is hardly a tendency that is unique to analyses of the region – narratives about communist regimes before the collapse of the soviet bloc showed a similar tendency. What these remarks about representing stasis are meant to indicate is that this practical organization of the research effort and of the resulting policy advice
shaped the political elites’ understanding, both in the Arab world and among ‘Western’ policy circles, of what constituted effective political behaviour in the region in a very particular way. As Volker Perthes and his colleagues noted in their work on Arab elites, these actors’ political strategies were organized to assure system maintenance and to cope with rotations of power within the elite.5

To explain the past resilience of Middle Eastern and North African regimes, as well as the continuing resilience of at least some of them, the literature on the region highlighted a set of causal factors that were deemed instrumental in producing the authoritarian status quo obtained for most of the post-Cold War era. Common narratives of the pre-Arab Spring period detail with much accuracy how authoritarian regimes were able to cope with mounting domestic and international pressure for more democratic governance by instrumentalizing democratic discourses and processes. Many accounts that differently prioritized three general sets of causal factors – cultural (for example, Islamism), securitarian (for example, militarism), and socio-economic (for example, developmentalism) – remain relevant to understanding continuity and change in the region after 2010. Even though authors writing before the 2011 Arab Spring did not in any way directly anticipate this wave of protests and political changes, the longer-term relevance of the structures and processes that they analysed at the time is hard to miss. Clearly, the capabilities of the military and security forces highlighted in 2005 by Posusney, Angrist, and their colleagues in Authoritarianism in the Middle East remain a key element in the evolution of the post-Arab Spring situation.6 Similarly, the competitive politico-cultural articulation of an Islamic agenda in a democratizing civil sphere outlined by Volpi, Cavatorta, and their colleagues in Democratization in the Muslim World also depicts another pre-structured field of interactions.7 As for the enduring economic difficulties noted by most specialists of the region, which have been a triggering element of the 2011 protests, they are equally unlikely to disappear in the short to medium term. However, to fully appreciate the value of these longer-term insights, as well as their limitations, the analyses that produced them have to be seen in the intellectual context that prevailed at the time.

In the 2000s, in contrast to the preceding decade when the focus was firmly (and often with a teleological agenda) on processes of transition to democracy,8 it became common for political analysts to propose accounts of competitive authoritarianism that explained political change (or its lack thereof) in persistently non-democratic MENA polities. While general comparative models of democratization and regime change continued to be refined in the 2000s, MENA cases hardly ever featured centrally in these schemes. Taking issue with Philippe Schmitter’s suggestion that it was ‘safe for transitologists to travel to the Middle East and North Africa’, Oliver Schlumberger noted that comparativists still had serious difficulties in dealing with what appeared to be the uniquely ‘unfree’ political character of this region of the world.9

While the MENA region provided a fertile ground for analyses of the methods of authoritarian governance, the analytical insights obtained in those parts of the
world did not have a significant impact on the theoretical debates about democratization processes and regime change. Instead, they produced a distinct sub-debate about the dynamics of authoritarian resilience. Schlumberger’s edited work surveying the authoritarian dynamics of the Middle East and North Africa led him to argue in 2007 that ‘for the foreseeable future democratization remains off the agenda in any Arab country’.\(^\text{10}\) Although it may now appear incongruous, this was a very cogent observation to make in relation to the institutionalized political mechanisms and processes analysed at the time. While most specialists of the region would not have disagreed with such a statement then, four years later, this estimate was proven wrong when some of the most authoritarian regimes in the region fell due to political dynamics that were not considered in these earlier accounts of routine authoritarianism.

Considering recent events in the Middle East and North Africa, then, to what extent is it sensible to rely on this earlier literature to explain current political transformations and trends in the region? Because generic explanations are concerned about trends, not about predicting specific events, to query the relevance of these analyses is to ask: what were these accounts explanations of? In the main, the literature on Middle Eastern and North African politics was most valuable to explain institutionalized patterns of authoritarianism.\(^\text{11}\) Analyses accounted for the articulation of repression and of co-optation in different types of regime or along a spectrum of competitive authoritarianism. In the field of democratization studies, as Lisa Anderson remarked, analysts were in addition looking for specific kinds of development and patterns that unduly focused their attention on a too narrow range of actors and practices.\(^\text{12}\) Narratives about competitive authoritarianism were thus developed in the region as a type of explanation that avoided both the over-sanguine ‘one-size-fits-all’ tendencies of the comparativists and the Arab/Islamic exceptionalism arguments of the neo-orientalists.\(^\text{13}\)

Overall, such narratives favoured an understanding of MENA politics predicated on a linear evolution of authoritarian governance in the region. Raymond Hinnebush’s sophisticated account of the evolutionary pathways of the diverse authoritarian regimes of the post-colonial period illustrates well the kind of detailed understanding of these regimes that had been produced at the time.\(^\text{14}\) These analyses of the mechanisms enabling the evolution of the MENA regimes without fundamentally challenging the mode of authoritarian governance of the ruling elites provided a better understanding of the specific democratic-authoritarian dilemmas of the region.\(^\text{15}\) The debates concerning what Steven Heydeman presented as trend toward ‘upgrading authoritarianism’ certainly complexified the issue of authoritarian resilience by noting the growing number of strategies of cooption that even the most autocratic regimes had to devise.\(^\text{16}\) Yet, what this focus on institutionalized mechanisms of authoritarian governance did not and could not provide was an appreciation of the resilience of these regimes in the face of new political dynamics. Even though analyses of “upgrading” considered the new political dynamics and the new tensions that had been introduced by revised forms of authoritarian governance, their assessment of change remained focused
on the existing institutional framework. At heart, what remained understated in these accounts of routine authoritarianism was the recognition that there are non-institutionalized situations and processes that could directly undermine the status quo. By (understandably) focusing on a narrow range of institutionalized political mechanisms and processes, the collective impact of the analyses of the region was to generate a tendency to over-state the stability of the Arab state, to rephrase Nazih Ayubi’s earlier argument about these post-colonial regimes.

In Tunisia and in Libya, now two of the most dramatic cases of regime change of the 2011 Arab Spring, the regimes were deemed to be so entrenched and refractive to change that analysts very much resigned themselves to wait for the death of the current ruler in order to consider the possibility of political change. Yet, the state was not as ‘strong’ (in Ayubi’s terminology) as it seemed, nor in some cases was it as ‘hard’ as it appeared – Ben Ali’s rapid flight from Tunisia providing a vivid illustration of this point. Revolutions, democratically based or otherwise, are not common political processes but they remain part of the spectrum of causally effective political behaviour, especially in authoritarian systems. And these revolutionary options are themselves structured at least in part by the type of authoritarian governance that prevails in each polity at any one time.

Authoritarianism in the Maghreb before the Arab Spring: structuring the options for political change

In the 2000s, analyses of authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa accounted for stasis in these polities mainly through three sets of interrelated factors: (i) the cultural/religious dimension of the region, (ii) the socio-economic situation of the countries and, (iii) the politico-institutional dynamics of the regimes (and associated foreign policy issues). These three components of Middle Eastern authoritarianism were combined differently in analyses of the region but these multiple combinations only served to highlight the stability of the MENA regimes.

Concerning Islamism, after 11 September 2001 in particular, ruling autocrats in the MENA played up the threat of radical political transformations initiated by Islamists in order to obtain the political quiescence of the international community, as well as to reap the military and financial rewards for ensuring ‘stability’ in the region. The cultural perspectives deployed by scholars to structure the political dynamics of the region were re-appropriated by policy analysts and policymakers in order to organize their policy options. The regional and international alliances developed during the Cold War were rearticulated to reflect the power dynamics of the post-Cold War order but, with a few exceptions – most notably Saddam Hussein – ruling autocrats were able to play on the security concerns of Western democracies to retain their support. In this situation, more than Islamism per se, what seriously constrained opportunity for political liberalization in the last decade was the instrumentalization of the Islamist threat by the ruling elites. As Saad Eddin Ibrahim remarks, ‘we find Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak and
Tunisia’s President Ben Ali telling their Western interlocutors, in effect, “It is either us or Bin Laden.” If that is the choice, of course Westerners – whatever their love for democracy – will opt for the autocrats over the theocrats. During the decade of the ‘War on Terror’ most clearly, the functional role that Islamism was made to play by most MENA regimes was similar to the one that right-wing autocrats around the world attributed to communism during the Cold War. This discursive construction of a comprehensive Islamic threat impacted not only on inter-state relations but also on democracy promotion policies which remained focused by default on a rather narrow (liberal and secular) range of actors in these countries.

Concerning militarism, domestically, the securitization of Islamism translated into two main strategies in the four Maghreb countries. In Libya and in Tunisia the regimes adopted a strategy of uncompromising repression of all forms of Islamic activism. In Libya Qadhafi had initially proposed his own version of Islamism in order to counter both the more traditionalist form of Islamic authority endorsed by the previous Libyan monarchy and the more politicized interpretations introduced by the Muslim Brotherhood. This all-out repressive option was reinforced in the mid-1990s as the guerrilla activities of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group created significant problems for the regime in eastern Libya. In Tunisia, by contrast, it is the committed secularism of the post-independence regimes, first of Bourguiba then of Ben Ali that ensured the continuing marginalization and then repression of Islamist movements. After a short-lived political opening in the late 1980s when Ben Ali came to power, the regime progressively increased the repression against them over the years.

In Morocco and in Algeria, by contrast, the regimes operated a more subtle distinction between anti-system and pro status quo Islamist movements. They repressed and/or banned the political activities of the former, but they allowed the latter to operate in the political system under conditions. In Algeria, when the military intervened in 1992 to end the democratic transition and to ban the country’s leading Islamist party (the Islamic Salvation Front), they authorized two smaller Islamist organizations to remain politically active. As the Algerian regime refined its system of controlled multipartism over the years, this legal Islamist opposition was co-opted to various degrees into the support networks of the regime. In Morocco, when King Hassan II engineered a partial political opening in the mid-1990s, the monarchy reached an agreement with one of the main Islamist movements of the country to allow it to compete in formal electoral processes. In exchange for this formal recognition, the newly created Islamic party agreed not to question the right of the monarchy to rule, and the role of the king as supreme religious authority in the kingdom. The electoral gains made by the Party of Justice and Development over the years ensured that this Islamic party stuck to its strategy of accommodation with the monarchy. This process of mutual accommodation was not without costs for the actors involved as over time voters increasingly chose not to participate in electoral processes they perceived would not produce any change of policy. Similarly, among Islamic activists the more oppositional stance of the illegal but tolerated Justice and Spirituality
Movement (which questioned the legitimacy of the monarchy as a system of governance) gained in popularity.\textsuperscript{27}

In developmentalist terms, the converging socio-economic predicaments of the four Maghreb countries in the 2000s resulted from the growing acceptance of neo-liberal economic reforms among the ruling elites of the region.\textsuperscript{28} Rentier theory had outlined how the developmental and governance dilemmas of oil-rich, rent-supported regimes differed from those of countries where the economy was not primarily based on wealth redistribution by the state. Yet, by the 2000s, the evolving strategies of those rentier states seeking to diversify their economy (Libya, Algeria) and of countries seeking to develop a more competitive market economy (Tunisia, Morocco) led the regimes to make very similar compromises. For all the state elites of the region, as noted by Perthes and his colleagues, the entrenchment of their rule meant the adaptation of a market economy to co-opt (emerging) social and political elites in their networks of governance.\textsuperscript{29} Crony capitalism and redistributive policies were merged to lock in the interests of economic actors and of the ruling elite, making economic liberalization a factor of the deeper institutionalization of authoritarianism.\textsuperscript{30} The degree to which the different regimes were able to harness these neo-liberal economic processes to the strengthening of their support base – or at the very least to the strengthening of the status quo – differentiates the four North African polities.

In Libya, after years of international economic sanctions, Qadhafi’s regime was only beginning in the 2000s tentatively to take advantage of neo-liberal economic reforms, whilst still relying heavily on redistributive policies.\textsuperscript{31} In Algeria, by contrast, the turn to market capitalism as a means of supplementing and diversifying the distributive policies of the regime was already under way in the 1990s. In Algeria, unlike in Libya, even though the regime still relied on patron-client relations based on the redistribution of the oil rent, it allowed the opening of economic and political spaces for a new category of crony capitalists and interested political entrepreneurs who helped transform old clientelist networks into a more competitive form of business politics.\textsuperscript{32}

In Tunisia, a polity with a much longer tradition of market capitalism, it is the apparent greed of the ruling elite and its reluctance to allow the emergence of business politics that undermined over time the effectiveness of the neo-liberal approach to authoritarianism. Beatrice Hibou’s Foucauldian interpretation of governmentality in this polity provides a detailed illustration of the way in which the institutions of the state and the policies of the regime sustained an authoritarian bargain from which the population could not easily opt out.\textsuperscript{33} Although the regime endorsed a neo-liberal model of development that favoured the urban middle class, its increasingly kleptocratic and repressive behaviour eroded over time the confidence of those very segments of the population that had initially acquiesced to this model of governance.\textsuperscript{34} For a regime that was internationally upheld as a success of neo-liberal economic governance, the practical social and economic implications of a ‘successful’ macro-economic regional integration were often dire for the average Tunisian citizen.\textsuperscript{35} In Morocco, by contrast, the turn to
neo-liberal market reforms of the 1990s was accompanied by a partial opening of the political field. In this way, the king made the traditionally pro-monarchy local notables benefit from market reforms, and in their turn the notables contributed to the continuing dominance of the pro-monarchy parties in a freer and more pluralistic parliamentary system.36

In all these situations, socio-economic dynamics are tightly connected to the methods of institutional management of the opposition within authoritarian systems. As Ellen Lust suggests, viewing electoral processes as business opportunities helps to understand better the dynamics of controlled electoralism in the region.37 The degree to which such opportunities have been proposed in each polity affected the width and depth of support for the regime and/or the status quo. At one end of the spectrum we obtain the complex networks of royal influence permeating Morocco’s fragmented multiparty system, and at the other end we have the crude reward mechanisms of Tunisia’s ultra-dominant party model; with Algeria sitting uneasily in the middle, and Libya opting out of business politics altogether. Politically and institutionally, controlled electoralism became an important characteristic of pseudo-democratic reform in the region in the post-Cold War period. In 2010, the four North African polities presented variations on this theme along an authoritarian continuum to answer their specific cultural, securitarian, and socio-economic challenges.

In Morocco, the monarchy devised from very early on a strategy of alliance building with different elites – economic, religious, military, rural, etc. – in order to remain the main power-broker in the country through the production of an ever-changing system of divide and rule. The formal endorsement of multipartyism (designed to include some Islamists) in the face of domestic and external pressures for democratization produced an electoral system where the king limits the powers of the parliament and retains a network of royal appointees to oversee the administration and policy implementation without having directly to rely on repression.38 As witnessed during the spring of 2011, particularly with the emergence of the 20 February Movement for Change, this is a dynamic agreement between the regime and the opposition in which the agenda for reform is set by the monarchy more than by social and political forces.39

In Algeria, after the violent civil conflict that wrecked the country in the 1990s, increased freedom of expression and of organization, as well as limited stakes in governance, were offered to political parties to obtain their participation in a skewed electoral and parliamentary system.40 The regime controlled electoral dynamics by strengthening the two pro-regime parties (National Liberation Front and National Rally for Democracy) and the presidential powers, as well as using a strategy of divide and rule of the different political currents in the country – Islamists versus secularists, Berbers versus Arabs, socialists versus free-marketeters, etc.41 In addition, the opposition was constrained by the realization during the civil conflict that there was a cohesive officer corps supporting the regime that was willing and able to use all necessary force to quell dissent. In
the winter of 2010, both repression by the security forces and the inability of the opposition forces to present a united front contributed to the lacklustre outcomes of the string of protests that stirred the country — that is, a lifting of the state of emergency and some small constitutional amendments.\textsuperscript{42}

The model of authoritarian governance found in Tunisia has been from very early on one of the most personalistic found in the region. The negotiated process of independence and the non-involvement of Tunisia in post-independence regional conflicts contributed to the military not becoming a significant corporate player in the country.\textsuperscript{43} In this context, social and political dissent were suppressed by a well-organized security apparatus that had learnt to isolate the political opposition and to contain sectorial protests within their immediate socio-economic sphere of activities (as with the restive mining sector in the 2000s).\textsuperscript{44} During the Ben Ali period, the effectiveness of the security apparatus at undermining all significant political and social forms of opposition to the regime enabled the ruling elite to concentrate all decision-making powers in small party-apparatchiks and family networks.\textsuperscript{45} This continuous and systematic repression of any organized movement of opposition also was instrumental in creating the conditions for a violent challenge to the regime through a leaderless movement of contestation.

In Libya, Qadhafi had also set up an unusual and personalistic model of ‘governance of the masses’ (Jamahiriya) which practically meant the disqualification of any kind of organized political force in the country, and the de facto concentration of all state prerogatives in the Gadhafi family and among their tribal allies. The ‘revolutionary’ tactics of the Qadhafi regime effectively undermined the institutional capabilities of the state, including those of a military institution whose divided loyalties had at times weakened Qadhafi’s rule.\textsuperscript{46} This strategy of authoritarian control produced a ‘neo-sultanistic’ model of governance underpinned by the oil rent that maintained by default tribal and clan allegiance as valid drivers for political behaviour in the polity.\textsuperscript{47} Here the analytical value of a ‘neo-sultanistic’ perspective is that it stresses the continuous weakening of the institutions of the state — including the military institution — by this method of authoritarian governance.

While the hegemonic character of the institutionalized political interactions between state and citizens was similar in Libya and in Tunisia, there was a different institutionalization of the military in the two countries that resulted from alternative approaches to the securitization of the regimes. The Tunisian regime relied essentially on its police apparatus to control dissent, while the Libyan elite maintained in addition strong organic relations with key military units (headed by Qadhafi’s sons).\textsuperscript{48} Hence, when waves of anti-governmental protests swept through these countries in December 2010–January 2011 (Tunisia) and in February–March 2011 (Libya), the regimes had different repressive options at their disposition. In Tunisia, when Ben Ali found himself in a situation where he had to call upon the army to maintain control of the situation, regime survival became dependent upon the goodwill of a military leadership that had not been part of the ruling elite up to that point. In those particular circumstances the Head of the Army,
General Ammar, chose not to side with the regime and let the popular uprising follow its course. Such a decision directly contributed to the fall of the regime and the departure of Ben Ali on 14 January 2011. In Libya, by contrast, the regime could hark back on its key constituencies – especially the capital – with the support of loyal military forces. Due to these military capabilities the Qadhafi elite was not inclined to give up power as swiftly as Ben Ali and sought instead to use these resources to fight back the opposition. After more than two weeks of setbacks induced by the failure of the conventional security forces to contain the situation, the Qadhafi regime began to re-establish its authority in different parts of the country through the deployment of loyal military units.

Democratic revolutions: misunderstandings as political opportunities in Tunisia and Libya

It is quite common for political analysts to produce retroactive predictions when unexpected changes happen; and the 2011 Arab Spring is no exception to the trend. As soon as the dust began to settle on the fall of the Ben Ali regime, new accounts explaining that the premises of a Tunisian revolt were already there to be seen appeared in the literature. Peter Schraeder and Hamadi Redissi stated that ‘although the speed with which the Ben Ali regime folded was stunning, several socioeconomic and political-military indicators suggested that Tunisia was ripe for change’. Alternatively, talking up the ‘Facebook revolution’ narrative, Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain argue that ‘there are many ways to tell the story of political change. But one of the most consistent narratives from civil society leaders in Arab countries has been that the Internet, mobile phones, and social media such as Facebook and Twitter made the difference this time’. Such narratives suggest that if analysts were able to frame adequately these socio-economic, political-military, and technological factors they could explain the dramatic failures of authoritarianism in Tunisia and elsewhere in the region using the same explanatory frameworks that were previously used to explain political stasis. The suspicion remains, however, that only a sustained effort at rationalization could present the pre-existing tensions and opposition to the Tunisian or Libyan regimes as the direct precursors of the uprisings of the 2011 Arab Spring. Considering the institutionalization of authoritarianism in these two countries, it may be more appropriate to remark that it is precisely because there were few mobilizational opportunities and structures to be found in Tunisia and Libya before the democratic revolutions that the protests could emerge and unfold in the way they did.

In Tunisia, starting with the immolation by fire of Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010, consciously non-ordinary, non-routine political choices began to be translated into actions that undermined the dominant discourse and organization of social normality in the country. For many years, the Tunisian regime had the rest of the world (and itself to a degree) believe that the country was developing and modernizing without serious difficulties of governance – and that discontent
could anyhow easily be dealt with by the security apparatus. To be sure, there had been some movements of contestation that had tested both sets of assumptions, like those of the Gafsa mining region in 2008. But their sectorial basis and their eventual demise through a mixture of repression and co-option comforted the regime’s developmentalist narrative. The evolution of public behaviour in response to Bouazizi’s actions produced a highly unusual wave of protests that undermined the regime’s (and the analysts’) pre-existing understanding of the causes of stability in the country. Typical of these old understandings was President Ben Ali’s declaration on national television on 28 December 2010 that: ‘the starting point of this series of events is an individual social case; we understand its circumstances and psychological factors’. Ben Ali’s assessment of the dramatic consequences of an all-too-common socio-economic predicament in the country and his disparaging remarks about ‘the inflated significance given to these events’ were not simply the delusional view of an aging autocrat but also a rather common interpretation of the situation at the time. In the early days of the Tunisian uprising, a chorus of analysts and policy-makers were similarly downplaying the potential of the uprising, and stressing instead the then widespread view – some might say the shared delusion – that the regime was ‘strong’ enough and ‘hard’ enough to put down this protest.

Soon, however, the multiplication of social protests in the central regions of Tunisia and the increased awareness of these protests contributed to the normalization of political contestation in the country. As Kurzman had noted in connection with the Iranian revolution, once people realize the generalized uncertainty that has been introduced in the system by such non-ordinary behaviours, they are likely to reassess the way in which they ordinarily responded to the demands of the state. In Tunisia, as a demonstrator told journalists, at the start of 2011 the crowd dared ‘to express views that no one would have dare to voice in public barely a month earlier’. Causally, the reproduction of these new patterns of contestation shed an unfavourable light on the (pre-existing) inadequacies of the regime, which further undermined the effectiveness of its rule. As often in such insurrectional situations, the role of repression (and of threats of repression) contributed to mobilize the opponents of the regime by discrediting the ruling elite even further.

The recognition of the failure of previously effective methods of authoritarian control was voiced by President Ben Ali himself in his last TV appearance on 13 January 2011 when he declared that he had been wrongly advised about the nature of the crisis and that he now understood what the people wanted. Yet, up to that point, long-held views about the resilience of the Tunisian regime and the impossibility of change in the country were still dominant among analysts and policy-makers. On 12 January, two days before Ben Ali fled the country, the French Foreign Minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, even proposed to provide police assistance to the Tunisian regime to help it contain the demonstrations with less bloodshed. That same day at a briefing at the US State Department, failing to sense the revolutionary dynamics of the moment, Assistant Secretary Philip J. Crowley, stressed that ‘we’re concerned about government actions, but we’re also concerned about actions by the demonstrators, those who do not have peaceful intentions’. 
In early January 2011, a combination of new and old causally effective mechanisms (personalistic governance, repression, mass protests) and ideational interpretations and choices (what is legitimate, moral, desirable, what is likely to succeed) led to a particular reconfiguration of the political in Tunisia. This particular combination of multiple causal factors became constitutive of a new political situation that gained a *sui generis* causal quality. The democratic revolution was no longer simply the outcome of a popular uprising, it became the reason for and the cause of what was happening in the country.

These political and ideational dynamics could not have been known beforehand – such knowledge would have enabled the devising of counter-measures – and any attempt at reconstructing them a posteriori is likely to produce a rationalization of these behavioural processes. When a few days after the flight of Ben Ali, the Head of the Tunisian Army, General Ammar, tells a crowd in Tunis that ‘our revolution is your revolution’, the semantic, ideational and behavioural processes that are involved in his speech-act are not reducible to a single explanation that equally makes sense to you, me, Gen. Ammar, his subordinates, the crowd, and various political actors inside and outside the country. No matter how detailed an analysis of the Tunisian military can be produced subsequently, and no matter how accurate an account of the decision-making processes inside the army leadership can be obtained, such retrospective insights cannot eliminate the crucial element of indeterminacy contained in these processes at the time. Post-hoc explanations of revolutionary episodes can only propose an argument that facilitates a more consensual framing of these events by multiple actors; they are not an actual depiction of how such events were actually shaped by the relevant actors.

In Libya, the initial stirrings against the Qadhafi regime were inspired by the success of the protests in neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt. Although in some cases, as in Benghazi, they articulated themselves on a long-running resistance to the regime, it is the ease and speed with which they gained momentum throughout the country that put the regime on the defensive. As in Tunisia, the Libyan leadership did not immediately grasp why old and trusted methods of crowd management – such as offering socio-economic rewards in exchange of political quiescence – suddenly did not work as well as they used to. In the early days of the protest, the Qadhafi regime launched a media campaign to advertise how much they had done for the development of the country, and how much more they were intent on doing for the people now – including handing out cash rewards to all ‘well-behaved’ Libyan citizens.

Not only were old authoritarian bargains not as effective as they used to be, but police repression also contributed to the mobilization of the protestors at home, and of the international community abroad. Having played the ‘War on Terror’ card well to come in from the cold in the mid-2000s, and having presented the protestors as being manipulated by dangerous Islamists, Qadhafi may have been genuine when he declared himself ‘surprised that we have an alliance with the West to fight al Qaeda, and now that we are fighting terrorists they have abandoned...
The crucial misunderstanding in this case is not about the likelihood of convincing foreign policy-makers that the protestors were allied to bloodthirsty Islamists, but about the propensity of the international community to turn a blind eye to internal troubles thus portrayed on account of regional stability. Qadhafi’s misperception of the (re-)orientation of key international actors at that particular time has to be superimposed onto the misreading of the Libyan situation by the international actors themselves when they (re-)considered their positions in the aftermath of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts. Tellingly, just a few days after Qadhafi’s expression of incredulity, the French Foreign Minister, Alain Juppé, declared during a visit to Cairo that ‘in truth that we may have let ourselves be intoxicated these past few years by arguments that said that the authoritarian regimes in place were the only bulwark against extremism’.67

The French government’s desire to show that it was changing its policy towards the Middle East and North Africa – illustrated by the replacement of Alliot-Marie by Juppé at the head of the Foreign Affairs Ministry – would be encapsulated in the position taken by French President, Nicolas Sarkozy. During a state visit to Turkey he declared at a press conference that: ‘our position is clear, Mr Qadhafi must go.’68 This reorientation of French foreign policy decided on 25 February 2011, only nine days after the beginning of the uprising against the Qadhafi regime, provides a good illustration of the type of reassessments that were under way in foreign policy circles at the time, and of the causal significance of particular misunderstandings about the Arab Spring. Having been slow to react to the Tunisian revolution and the Egyptian upheaval, French policy-makers (closely followed by the British) took the view that the widespread riots that shook Libya, the wanton repression unleashed by Qadhafi, and the splits within the Libyan military, were signs of an impending collapse of the regime. Hence, they geared their foreign policy efforts toward supporting an emerging rebel coalition in the country on the (mis)understanding – increasingly common in the international community at the time – that the Libyan regime was already in its death throes.

Three days after Sarkozy’s declaration, on 28 February, British Prime Minister David Cameron declared in the UK Parliament that he had ‘asked the Ministry of Defence and the Chief of the Defence Staff to work with our allies on plans for a military no-fly zone’.69 It is noticeable that at the time of this policy reorientation, the Libyan uprising was still growing in strength and that the military response of the Qadhafi regime – and especially the use of its air force – was ineffective. Like Cameron’s indication at that time that the UK would consider arming the opposition to the regime if it facilitated the departure of Qadhafi, these ad hoc re-articulations of foreign policy were produced at a time when the uprising did not appear to require such a step to be taken for it to be successful. Indeed, by the end of February 2011, some policy-makers less concerned with producing uplifting foreign policy rhetoric even suggested that coercitive policies targeting the Libyan regime might already be obsolete due to the pace of events on the ground. As the European Union was considering imposing oil sanctions on Libya, the European Energy Commissioner, Guenther Oettinger, declared that an embargo would be
counterproductive as ‘there is reason to believe most of the oil and gas fields are no longer under Gaddafi’s control’. As the counter-offensive led by Qadhafi’s elite military units in early March illustrated, earlier assessments of the regime’s weakness were over-sanguine. However, by the time foreign policy-makers took stock of this new situation, they had already committed themselves to directly intervening in the Libyan conflict – a situation formalized by the passing of UN Resolution 1973 on 7 March 2011, authorizing the use of all necessary measures to protect civilian populations in Libya.

**Conclusion: democratic surges and authoritarian rejigs in North Africa**

In order to answer meaningfully questions about why and how some authoritarian regimes remain in power while others fall when confronted with similar difficulties in the MENA region, it is important to take a step back to consider the changing focus of explanations of Middle East politics. It is useful to ask, for example, how can explanations of authoritarian stability in countries like Algeria or Morocco retain their relevance during a period like the 2011 Arab Spring, when similar narratives are misleading in polities like Tunisia or Libya? Explanations of institutionalized authoritarianism retain more of their relevance in those situations where the possibility of a gradual reform of the regime is perceived to exist, domestically and internationally. In those contexts, because alternative means of practicing and institutionalizing new forms of political governance are already being considered and routinized to some degree, processes of regime change are articulated in more structured and predictable patterns – that is, reform of institutions. By contrast, the possibility of a sudden and dramatic failure of a regime is best understood in terms of a lack of opportunity for an institutionalized (or partially institutionalized) process of political change. In those situations, explanations of the stability of routine authoritarianism either apply fully, as they did until the popular uprisings, or not at all (once the uprisings gain momentum), because they do not account for the mechanisms of de-institutionalization and re-institutionalization.

In Tunisia and in Libya, the non-routine character of the protest and its violence were a direct consequence of the way in which the incumbent regimes ruled the country, without intermediaries between the agents of the state and the citizens. Once the initial threshold of open defiance to the regime was reached in the face of police repression, the ruling elites did not have at their disposition reliable and effective instruments of communication with the protesters. In Morocco and in Algeria, by contrast, sporadic protests did not turn into nationwide unrest, partly due to the nature of the protests, and partly due to the organization of the political field. Even though both countries were affected by the wave of social unrest that swept through the region – especially Algeria were rioting and cases of immolation by fire followed closely what took place in Tunisia – the 2011 Arab Spring did not induce a dramatic transformation of institutions and modes of governance. In the Moroccan and Algerian pseudo-democratic systems, the
ruling elites could open channels of communication with existing opposition forces in order to offer reforms that met some of the demands of the protestors, as mediated by these established political actors. By making this point, I do not intend to discount other country-specific factors, such as the ‘confrontation fatigue’ that resulted from the civil conflict of the 1990s in Algeria, or the temporal and religious legitimacy that the King of Morocco, as ‘Commander of the Faithful’ can mobilize, or again the different roles played by Berber communities in the two countries. Instead, I am suggesting that the abovementioned generic mechanisms of reform are articulated within these specific socio-historical contexts (both domestically and internationally).

The patterns of political change obtained in Morocco and in Algeria can be seen as an evolution of the reformist model of governance that the leaders of the Moroccan and Algerian states (King Mohammed VI, President Bouteflika) had introduced in preceding years. The limited concessions that they made, accompanied by a degree of police repression, contained the protests, principally because opposition forces and the protesters had some reasonable expectations that the system could still be reformed in this way – as well as some vested interest in the case of part of the legal opposition. Similar expectations were not sufficiently present in Tunisia and Libya where Ben Ali and Qadhafi had seriously undermined the trust of the population in the state over the years – a mistrust heightened by the brutality of their initial attempt at repressing anti-governmental demonstrations. The practical lack of a template for political change in these two countries made the emergence of a structured and predictable process of reform unlikely at a time when the population was already increasingly not responding to routine mechanisms of authoritarian control.

Although they were informed by pre-existing social networking, the initial ‘leaderless’ national revolts witnessed in Tunisia and in Libya, are indicative of an absence of structures and mechanisms of political mobilization. The visibility of the role played by the new media and social networking sites (Twitter, Facebook, mobile phones) in the organization of the initial waves of protest illustrate not only the importance of virtual networking but also the weakness of more conventional tools of mobilization in those contexts. The role of the new media could not be explored within the confines of the present argument but a relevant point to make in this context is that from the perspective of the state, the outburst of effective mobilizational mechanisms that they generated was as unpredicted and unpredictable as the other dimensions of the democratic revolutions that structured and were structured by them. While these overall structural conditions can help to understand the spontaneous and anarchic character of the uprisings, they do not and cannot explain the specific trajectory – let alone the outcomes – of a revolutionary democratic surge (as the diverging trajectories followed by Tunisia and Libya in 2011 illustrated). What can be learnt from the recent upheaval in North Africa is that to frame political change as well as stability in the region political analysts and policy-makers need to retain a plurality of explanatory perspectives on what can constitute effective political behaviour in authoritarian systems.
Notes

4. See Diamond, ‘Why Are There No Arab Democracies?’.
5. Perthes, Arab Elites.
6. Posusney and Angrist, Authoritarianism in the Middle East.
7. Volpi and Cavatorta, Democratization in the Muslim World.
8. See the contributions to Salamé, Democracy without Democrats?.
10. Ibid., 14.
11. See Lust-Okar, Structuring Conflict in the Arab World.
13. See Valbjørn and Bank, ‘Examining the “Post” in Post-Democratization’.
15. See Albrecht and Schlumberger, ‘“Waiting for Godot”’.
18. Ayubi, Over-stating the Arab State.
19. See Sadiki, ‘Wither Arab “Republicanism”?’. This argument has been framed in many different ways over the decades, but see particularly Snyder, ‘Paths Out of Sultanistic Regimes’.
20. See Gerges, America and Political Islam; Mamdani, Good Muslim, Bad Muslim.
22. For analyses of the common policy conundrums derived from this worldview see the contributions to Carothers and Ottaway, Uncharted Journey.
23. See Martinez, ‘Libya’.
24. Murphy, Economic and Political Change in Tunisia.
28. Perthes, Arab Elites.
33. See Murphy, Economic and Political Change in Tunisia. And, with a focus on the gains of specific social elites, Erdle, ‘Tunisia’.
34. See, Hibou, Meddeb, and Hamdi, Tunisia After 14 January; Zaafrane and Mahjoub, ‘The Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Zone’. And, with a particular focus on local dynamics, King, Liberalization against Democracy.
35. See Liddell, ‘Notables, Clientelism’.
36. Lust, ‘Competitive Clientelism in the Middle East’. In Egypt, Lisa Blaydes illustrates how elections came to constitute a mechanism of resource allocation that superseded earlier, more nepotistic models of patron-client relations. Blaydes, Elections and Distributive Politics.
40. Werenfels, Managing Instability in Algeria.
42. Brown, ‘Algeria’s Midwinter Uproar’.
43. Daguzan, ‘Maghreb’; Ware, ‘The Role of the Tunisian Military’.
44. Chouikha and Gobe, ‘La Tunisie entre la Révolte du Bassin Minier’.
45. Camau and Geisser, Le Syndrome Autoritaire; Beau and Graciet, La Régente de Carthage.
46. Martínez, The Libyan Paradox; Vandewalle, Libya since 1969.
49. An enlightening reassessment of the causal accounts produced to explain the similarly unexpected Islamic revolution in Iran can be found in Kurzman, The Unthinkable Revolution.
52. There were undoubtedly social movements that had challenged these regimes’ modi operandi, especially in recent years when autocrats tried to upgrade their instruments of authoritarian governance; but none had reached a critical mass quickly enough to transform the power relations inside these polities. See the contributions to Stephan, Civilian Jihad; and to Beinin and Vairel, Social Movements.
53. See Allal, ‘Réformes Néolibérales, Clientélismes et Protestations’; Chouikha and Gobe, ‘La Tunisie entre la “révolte du bassin minier”’.
55. See for example in the French context, Pape, ‘Le Scandal’.
58. Goldstone and Tilly, ‘Threat (and Opportunity)’.
59. ‘We can only deplore the violence affecting the people of a friendly nation. I note nonetheless that this situation demonstrates the validity of the policy that we advocate when we propose that the know-how of our security forces, recognized throughout the world, enables the resolution of this type of security issues’. Michelle Alliot-Marie, ‘Assemblée nationale, XIIIe législature, Session ordinaire de 2010–2011, Compte rendu intégral, Première séance du mardi 11 janvier 2011’. http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/cri/2010-2011/20110091.asp#INTER_5 (accessed January 5, 2012).
62. Generic typologies of the military can be useful analytical tools but only because they outline general tendencies, not because they provide specific explanations for particular sequences of events. In the ‘Arab Spring’ context see Barany, ‘The Role of the Military’.
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63. Kurzman, ‘Can Understanding Undermine Explanation?’.
64. Martinez, The Libyan Paradox.

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