The Arab States after the Uprisings: 'Transitions,' Rebuilt Authoritarianisms and Collapsing States

Philippe Droz-Vincent
Professor of Political Science and International Relations
Sciences-Po, Grenoble

In the beginning of the 2010s, the Arab states witnessed greater political change than in the preceding decades. They had not faced challenges or undergone macro-political transformations of similar importance since the revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s, which brought to power Nasser in Egypt or the Ba'athists in Iraq and Syria. Mass uprisings seriously shook authoritarianism in the Arab world. The latter area seemed poised to slip free of its authoritarian 'exceptionalism,' a feature that came to the fore in the 1990s and 2000s, when compared with the alleged globalization of democracy elsewhere in the world. In a matter of weeks, Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt were overthrown and, within months, with the help respectively of a NATO intervention and a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) mediation, Gaddafi was killed and Saleh in Yemen was forced out of office. With the exceptions of Bahrain, where a large uprising was crushed with the help of a Saudi and Emirati intervention, and Syria, where the uprising turned into civil war, hopes ran high: political parties came out of the shadows, particularly Islamist and Salafi organizations; civil society activities boomed; interim authorities organized national dialogues (with promising prospects, especially in Yemen), elections, constitutional reforms and transitional pacts. In 2011, the Arab states passed through what might be called in comparative politics a critical juncture, which opened up a period of transitions, namely processes of socio-political change (characterized with alternations in power and increased new liberties) whose outcomes were largely indeterminate, or at least not predetermined as a transition to democracy.

Yet, a few years later, hopes were severely dashed. In 2013, Egypt's first democratically elected president and a Muslim Brother was ousted after one year in office by a military coup. In 2012-13, following a growing militarization of the uprising, Syria entered a full-scale civil war, with the afflux of Sunni Salafi jihadists from outside and regional interventions, especially from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and Hezbollah. Mid-2014, Libya and Yemen exploded in civil war with the breakdown of state institutions. Challenges to the State grew everywhere, especially with the rise of the alleged Islamic State (*Daesh*). Only Tunisia came out as a democratic, although fragile, exception. The outcomes during the 2010s of the new phase that was unexpectedly opened up in 2011 were different across the region, with the Arab world experiencing the entire spectrum of comparative politics with transitions, authoritarian rebuilding and collapsing states.

Where Did the Uprisings (Revolutions) Go?

The high visibility of mass civic protests in public spaces in 2011 was succeeded in 2012-13 by the end of large-scale street protests, the return of repression against all manner of political dissent, the diminishing resolve of some activists driven back home or to their computers and a generalized return to authoritarianism – even in Tunisia, talks about presidential centrality are being increasingly heard or at least advocated in 2018.

The fateful drift away from democratic hopes should not lead us to underestimate the stressful challenge of the 2011 uprisings in various Arab states, including those said to have been left out of the wave of Arab Springs, especially Oman and Saudi Arabia –

other 'super-rentier' monarchies such as Qatar or the Emirates represent specific cases of sparsely populated and closely-knit societies where more than two-thirds of the population is made up of non-Arab foreigners; and Jordan was also shaken along with Morocco. No regime came out untouched, although republics that had increasingly turned personalistic or were ruled by 'sultanistic' regimes (to borrow the Weberian vocabulary) were especially affected:[1] sultanistic regimes had started to exclude the wider circle of military, bureaucratic and professional elites from rewards and opportunities or became too predatory on business - Ben Ali's wife and her family's corruption, Mubarak's plan to install his son as successor. This description was also prevalent for Libya, Yemen and Syria, but the outcomes there were not so straightforward due to the different entrenching of regimes in the socio-cultural landscape, with tribes, fragmented societies or confessional solidarity. To date, there has been no extinction of activism, street protests, demonstrations, strikes, protests, outcries or sit-ins, and many sites of activism have remained in advocacy-oriented initiatives (human rights, women's rights, press freedoms, social empowerment), new youth or leftist parties/groupings, and even among new generations of Islamists coming out of the strictly hierarchical and gerontocratic Muslim Brotherhood.[2] Tellingly and very surprisingly, social protests have remained active after 2013 in repressive Egypt. Even in war-torn Syria, the potential for civic activism has not been fully overshadowed and extinguished by the proliferation of armed groups.

Observers were surprised by the sudden emptiness of the once-full streets, after the many activists and opposition leaders chose to depart from activism, also under the effects of repression. Yet, the real impact of the social mobilizations of 2011 and continued activism should not be assessed in terms of state power vs. social resistance and the real impact of the uprisings on politics is difficult to capture just with the notion of a unified outcome (success or failure at the macro-political level). We can still find enduring effects of these movements in the recognition of citizens' rights to protest (though repressed), the presence of informal channels of access to and awareness of social justice, not just at the policy level but in terms of changed state-society relations and culture (with jumps and reversals) and in particular the transformation of relational, emotional and cognitive mechanisms inside society with long-term effects. And this remains an essential source of danger for alleged rebuilt authoritarianisms, which explains their exclusionary and repressive approach (see below).

Tellingly and very surprisingly, social protests have remained active after 2013 in repressive Egypt. Even in war-torn Syria, the potential for civic activism has not been fully overshadowed and extinguished by the proliferation of armed groups

Indeed, massive social mobilizations were not able to completely erase the structures of authoritarianism. They stressed them to breaking point and were able to disrupt existing authoritarian equilibriums by shaking structures of power and legitimacy ('normal' or 'usual' authoritarianism enduring for decades). None of the mobilized societies, or at least parts of them, succeeded in acquiring meaningful and sustained influence over the course of transitional processes, with the exceptions of some specific moments and in the Tunisian case. Transitions were real and led to huge changes, but the teleological view of them as transitions to democracy was farfetched. On the other hand, in some cases, beginnings of transition opened up civil wars or slow-burning coups that turned into civil wars.

Authoritarianism Reassertion or Authoritarianism 2.0

Protests that gathered momentum by early 2011 and that spread from Tunisia to Egypt and then onwards to Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria had a highly

[1] R. Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, Harvard University Press, 2012, J Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings*, Oxford University Press, 2012

[2] Arab Reform Initiative, *Effervescent Egypt*, Paris, January 2018

stressful effect on Arab states with their imposing character and generic demands for dignity, liberty, humanitarian rights, social justice and economic grievances. These sustained, cross-class, geographically-widespread mass protests disrupted authoritarian normality and placed authoritarian regimes under great stress, leading them to resort to authoritarianism as a way to gather coercive means and, 'beyond coercion,' to build some form of legitimacy by redistributing and giving 'direction' (=authoritarian durability) to various state institutions or clients in the privatized economy. As exemplified in 2011, Arab societies were strong and their protests were much more than a simple check on the grandiose ambitions of the state elites (the weak State/strong society hypothesis of the 1980s). Yet they had no organizational capabilities to sustain their influence when the focus of transformations shifted from the streets to re-institutionalization. Their capabilities were limited, constrained by authoritarian legacies after years of authoritarian repression that uprooted all forms of politics. And new actors, whether politically organized or closer to the model of social mobilizations, showed their political inabilities and inexperience and their lack of support from broader society during institution-building processes.

Transitions were real and led to huge changes, but the teleological view of them as transitions to democracy was far-fetched. On the other hand, in some cases, beginnings of transition opened up civil wars or slow-burning coups that turned into civil wars

In Max Weber's view, the State as a social organization that possesses legal order, bureaucracy, compulsory jurisdiction and monopoly over the legitimate use of force is not just another social organization similar to those emerging out of societal dynamics. The State might have been put under stress and in disarray in 2011-12, but it might also have served as a springboard for power when one actor (the military) was able to convene a coalition of forces and give it a 'direction.' The Arab State has continued to be a unique political actor with superiority in terms of power and decision-making, except in cases where it collapsed: the State plays a much more decisive role in the Arab world when compared with other regions such as Latin America or Europe, where its role was transformed in the 1990s; and its extensive political resources are available to whomever controls its bureaucratic levels and is then able to shape the rules of the game in state-society relations.

Egypt acted as a trendsetter in the Arab world and as a role-model that some actors in eastern Libya (general Haftar) tried to mimic after 2013. One actor, the military, was able to impose itself on other elites and mobilized publics, albeit through repression.[3] The military was deeply entrenched in the Egyptian political system and the economy and could hamper the development of a transition from that stance: it displayed capabilities, whether material or, more importantly, moral, which were much more effective than those of a delegitimized implementer such as the Interior Ministry after its association with the day-to-day authoritarianism during the Mubarak regime. Yet the army was under as much stress in 2011 as other state institutions, as a consequence of the disappearance of the executive's 'direction' in a highly centralized system. By projecting a strong self-image of the army as a pillar of Egypt, at the service of the country, it was able to keep its cohesiveness and reposition itself in the centre of the stage, in line with the January uprising - as signalled by the much-touted slogan "the military and the people are one hand" (*al-jaysh wa al-sha'b ayad waheda*). The army benefited from an acute polarization between the Muslim Brotherhood, who came to power through elections, and those who feared and opposed them, in particular in the state apparatus, especially the police, judges, the media and big entrepreneurs. This paved the way to a crucial context for the military's intervention and then entrenchment in the power. The army

[3] R. Springborg, *Egypt*, London, Polity, 2017; also Ph. Droz-Vincent, "The military and transitions in the Arab World" in T. Roeder and R. Grote, dir., *Constitutionalism in the Arab World*, Oxford University Press, 2016

could not have acted in the absence of such a specific setting. Nothing was foreordained from the start or the product of a secret and looming plot of the military and the 'deep state' to eradicate the Muslim Brotherhood as early as 2011. Yet the army was able to act decisively with a coup in 2013 and to hijack the transitional path by manipulating the *Tamarod* (rebellion) mobilization in public spaces under the guidance of the military intelligence (close to the Defence Minister and its former head, general al-Sisi).

The new al-Sisi regime has remained cohesive with the presidency and its military networks at the centre of the regime reformation, with a militarization of power previously unseen in Egypt, at least since Nasser: the military under Mubarak was an essential pillar of the regime, yet the Mubarak system stood above the military. The new regime has also displayed an extreme fragmentation of state structures and difficulties to rein in various centres of power, with security services playing a hidden guiding role. To give some degree of cohesiveness to the regime, the military has proffered a powerful discourse about the State, with constant references to the state apparatus, the State as a unifying force and the redefinition of its role under the heading of "respect for the State" (*hayba al-dawla*). The regime has lacked ideological glue beyond the drumbeat announcement of endless infrastructure projects (including the new Suez Canal) financed by Saudi and Emirati money and at the price of an increasing debt.

And the al-Sisi regime has displayed a security-first approach to the State taking a repressive turn of levels not seen since 2013, with offensive and heavy-handed state violence unleashed against the Muslim Brotherhood, beginning with the Raba'a Square massacre, followed by mass imprisonments and trials. The Muslim Brotherhood has been lumped together with *Daesh* militants in the Sinai and, more generally, opponents of all kinds have been labelled as terrorists and criminalized – this narrative giving 'dark' authoritarianism a political cover. And the precariousness of the perches on which these revamped authoritarianisms sit at a time of mass politics have been best exemplified by the harsh tactics regimes like Egypt have deployed, with anti-terror legislations, and also targeting journalists, human rights activists, NGOs and intellectuals. In parallel, and incidentally, the prevalent atmosphere of fear, chaos and insecurity in the region, which can be seen nowhere else in the world, with the rise of *Daesh* in Iraq and Syria (2014-2017) and its enduring consequences in Libya, in the Sinai or Egypt in general, and more generally four conflict-affected countries (Libya, Yemen, Syria, Iraq) in the area, have led to the prioritization of security over freedom among society – furthermore, the major external powers have continued to value stability. The al-Sisi regime has played on populism and the search for normality as some (a majority?) of people facing huge economic hardship have given up activism for some semblance of normality and stability in an atmosphere of fear, according to 'law and order' strategies.

And the al-Sisi regime has displayed a security-first approach to the State taking a repressive turn of levels not seen since 2013, with offensive and heavy-handed state violence unleashed against the Muslim Brotherhood

This is not just a return to the Mubarak years but a new formula of authoritarianism in a post-2011 setting exercised by an insecure and vulnerable authoritarian regime that has moved away from the more inclusive, redistributive and populist authoritarianism of the 1990s-2000s. A similar strategy is being followed in Saudi Arabia – with a new period of authoritarianism since the rise of Mohammad bin Salman, the son of King Salman – and the Emirates, where, in addition to pouring massive amounts of money into welfare programmes, they have led a virtual counter-revolution to preserve what was left of the old authoritarian order in the Arab world.

Collapsed States and Civil Wars

The stress test of massive social mobilizations had far-reaching consequences for more fragile institu-

The Fragile Tunisian 'Exception' in the Spectrum of Arab Transitions of the 2010s*

Western governments and scholars rushed to label Tunisia a successful case of democratic transition. Indeed, Tunisian elites were able to preserve the State after the fall of Ben Ali and his immediate clique of profiteers and securocrats and to preserve the potential for further democratization, with the essential help of Tunisia's (relatively) preserved tradition of civil society, in particular key organizations such as UGTT, UTICA, lawyers and human rights groups – who were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Ben Ali had a predatory role but did not dismantle the existing bureaucracy as a structure for governing society – especially difficult in a country with a strong national identity. Political elites were able to negotiate a division of power within the state and political institutions – and the charismatic leader of Ennahdha was able to leverage his authority within mainstream Islamists toward dialogue. A crucial intervening factor, when compared with the similar case of Egypt was that Tunisia had a small, very professional military, with no experience of political engagement, as a consequence of deliberate policies adopted by Bourguiba then followed up by Ben Ali to restrain the military – Ben Ali was a military officer yet very quickly became a securocrat. The military was literally handed the power with the fall of the Ben Ali regime, but returned it to civilian elites, announced it would submit to civilian rule and stood aside from all politics.

After the failure of the troika (Ennahdha with the Congress for the Republic and Ettakatol) and the dangerous polarization between Islamists and secularists in 2013 (the Bardo Square demonstrations) – a sign of Ennahdha's eagerness to take the reins of power –, political elites managed to reach a consensus between Ennahdha (religious conservatives) on the one hand and networks of so-called secularists and old (Ben Ali) regime elites in Nidaa Tounes (nationalist conservatives) on the other. In a country endowed with a large middle class, high levels of urbanization and a high ratio of literacy, civil society organizations played a key role in nudging Tunisia in a democratic direction by adopting a watchdog role and facilitating national dialogues when Tunisian politics hit an impasse.

Yet, hopes among Tunisians for improved access to politics and a more equitable distribution of economic resources were dashed with the weakening of state institutions, under a cooperative yet competitive pact between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahdha and with deepening social inequalities and regional asymmetries. The competitive cohabitation between Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes has slowed down political reforms to a halt, thus weakening state institutions and their legitimacy by keeping the country in a state of endless and unstable transition – this is highlighted by the high level of abstention among young Tunisians, of which there is a high percentage within the population. And 'pacted' politics has led to a distribution of posts in the administration along partisan lines and to an increased corruption/clientelism (in terms of access to credit, public tenders, etc.). Although now much more 'democratized'/ 'horizontalized' in an opened partisan and political system and no longer restricted to Ben Ali's clique, consensual or 'pacted' democratization also has its 'dark side.' Technocrats in the government and genuinely devoted to the task of reforms have faced the difficult task of implementing real reforms, enticing foreign (governmental and private) direct investment, not to mention the structural challenges of a Tunisian economic model that was oriented toward tourism and exports and over-centralized in the hands of a few urban coastal entrepreneurs, finding themselves unable to offer the large-scale job opportunities away from the coast, as envisioned in the so-called call for "compensative inequality" (or "positive discrimination") between regions in the January 2014 Constitution. And, in parallel, Tunisia has experienced highly destabilizing terrorist attacks (with three major attacks in 2015 and an assault on Ben Guerdane in 2016), especially along its unsecure borders with Algeria and Libya.

* M. Penner Angrist, "Understanding the Success of mass Civic Protest in Tunisia" *The Middle East Journal*, 67(4), Autumn 2013;

tional settings in Libya and Yemen. Behind the veneer of authoritarian durability, these states were much more complex: Libya was a weak state, with ambiguous sovereignty and a tradition of persistent local politics; Yemen had a millennial state tradition but was rocked by its difficult adaptation to changes, in particular to its transformation, since the mid-20th century, from a Zaydi imamate to a republic subject to regional influences.[4] Furthermore, decades-long authoritarian regimes under Gaddafi and Saleh weakened and to some extent destroyed the State: Gaddafi had an anti-institutionalist strategy and circumvented institutions to buttress his own familial and tribal clientelist network; Saleh overused institutions, in particular transforming the military and security forces as a way to enhance his preeminence as a power-broker by favouring his clan. There was a 'clanification' or 'tribalization' of the State and its main institutions to an extent never seen in Egypt or Tunisia – but similar to Iraq or Syria. In 2011, transition was further hindered by an international intervention and an eight-month civil war in Libya and a quasi (and relatively contained) civil war in Yemen. In particular, the military as an institution exploded in many parts in Libya and fractured in two halves in Yemen, leaving room for the rise of militias or large numbers of army colonels turned warlords.

There was a 'clanification' or 'tribalization' of the State and its main institutions to an extent never seen in Egypt or Tunisia – but similar to Iraq or Syria

In Libya, France, Great Britain, the ('leading-from-behind') US Administration and their Qatari, Emirati or Saudi allies over-estimated the cohesion and abilities of the alleged political leadership (the National Transitional Council): Libyan transitional authorities were overwhelmed by the rise of armed revolutionary brigades, recruited at a local level on the basis of cities, neighbourhoods, villages, tribes, clans, families, etc, with the implosion of the military in many parts, the members of which then joined the revolutionaries (*thuwwar*). In May 2014, former political conflicts (over legislative elections and the role of former army officers in the east) coalesced into a full-scale civil war between two warring camps. The bleak picture that has arisen in Libya is one of fragmentation, with three powerless governments, including a 'reconciliatory' one resulting from UN mediation, and two parliaments navigating a maze of armed militias that have been the key stakeholders on the ground.

In Yemen, there was a genuine transition from 2011 to 2013, in particular with a national dialogue which ignited some hope, though very much dominated by the old political elite – neighbouring Saudi Arabia was also panicked by the idea of a successful uprising on its doorstep. Transition dragged on and ended inconclusively in 2014 amidst frustrations, particularly regarding its implicit objective to resolve two regional conflicts, the southern question and the Houthi rebellion, a northern Zaydi revivalist movement that waged nine wars with Saleh. And in September 2014, the Houthis (or *Ansar Allah*) benefiting from the decay of the Yemeni State and with the backing of military units and tribal forces loyal to former President Saleh, seized Sana'a. They placed interim President Hadi under house arrest – he fled to Aden then Saudi Arabia – and marched south from their northern stronghold. In March 2015, a military coalition led by Saudi Arabia gave a new regional dimension to the conflict with an intense and destructive campaign of aerial bombardments and with an Emirati intervention on the ground (along with numerous mercenary forces) that backed the 'pro-government' (Hadi) forces. In particular in the south, veterans of the former South Yemen mounted resistance to the Houthis (and Saleh) and became more openly secessionist while hosting Hadi's forces in Aden, an inconvenient marriage that exploded at the end of 2017. In parallel, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), one of the most powerful branches of the terrorist group, made territorial advances in the south, even taking control of cities, ports and whole military units and their equipment. And in December 2017, the uneasy Saleh-Houthi

[4] L. Anderson, "They Defeated Us All," *The Middle East Journal*, 71(2), Spring 2017 ; P. Salisbury, *Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order*, London, Chatham House, December 2017

alliance collapsed and Saleh was killed by Houthi forces, adding to the country's fragmentation. State and societal collapse amid a Saudi blockade and humanitarian catastrophe, sectarian tensions the likes of which had not existed in the country – with the Houthis now said to be 'Shias' and proxies allegedly supported by Teheran –, and hardened sectarian (Salafi) narratives fuelled by Saudi discourses and aiming at ridding Yemen of 'Shia influence,' combined to draw a bleak picture of the heavily fractured Yemeni State.

At a more general level, these developments reveal a new weakening of territorial control for the Arab states, shattered over the course of recent years by the Arab Spring uprisings (in the beginning) and their subsequent and various outcomes (difficult or aborted transitions, rebuilt authoritarianisms and state collapse). Contestations of territorial Arab states are nothing new, but the recent developments represent the gravest challenge since the state system crystallized in the 1920s – and some of these new challengers have boasted about breaking states allegedly related to the Sykes-Picot agreements, an emblem of all that was wrong in the Arab state system. In a context of weakened or even collapsing states, some political actors have tried to carve out the territorial foundations of new states, as exemplified by the (increasingly secessionist) Southern Movement in Yemen, to a lesser extent federalists in Cyrenaica (*al-Barqa*) in eastern Libya, Kurdish nationalists in Iraq (with ebbs and flows after the failed September 2017 referendum on independence) and, more pragmatically, a Syrian branch (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat,* PYD) of the Turkish PKK in northeastern Syria (called the Rojava or the Arab-Kurdish federation). And other 'parasitical' actors such as *Daesh* (renamed the alleged Islamic State) have capitalized opportunistically on the weakening of Syria and Iraq by merging a transnational jihadist call from al-Qaeda extolling Muslims to revolt and recruiting fighters from around the world, in an attempt to locally rule (or pillage) a territory (from 2014 to 2018).

And the whole series of questions about the Arab State deciphered in this article are crystallized in the complex trajectory of Syria since 2011, from civic uprising to militarized revolt with increased sectarianism, to jihadization with the influx of regional and foreign fighters,[5] then regional and international conflict in particular after the mid-2015 Russian intervention. The plunge into civil war, for which the regime was responsible to a greater extent than the (not blameless) opposition, gave the severely weakened Assad regime *carte blanche* to crack down on protesters and gradually regain control of a 'useful Syria,' with crucial help from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah – though important sources of oil and wheat production have remained in the autonomous eastern part of the Euphrates supported by an international (American, British and French) coalition. At a time when the Assad regime has regained sovereignty over most geographical parts of Syria and the Daesh 'State' (Raqqa) has come to an end, now in the hands of PYD forces, questions remain regarding whether or not the Syrian State is in complete dereliction – the Assad regime is victorious but weakened, fragmented by internal or Iranian-supported militias, and severely exhausted in terms of resources to fight and govern – or if it remains the pillar of revamped 'Assadian' authoritarianism. At the same time, Syria has become a hotbed of regional rivalries or proxy wars played out within its borders (Turks vs. Kurds, Israelis vs. Iranians, Israelis vs. Hezbollah, Saudis vs. Iranians, etc.) and even international tensions between Russia and the US, thereby highlighting Syria's weakened sovereignty.

[5] Philippe Droz-Vincent, "State of Barbary (Take Two): from the Arab Spring to the return of violence in Syria," *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 68, no. 1, Winter 2013-2014