Arab Spring: The Awakening of Civil Society. A General Overview

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Turmoil is probably the best characterisation of Mediterranean societies in 2011, when historic political and economic events swept across the region. The political turmoil of the Arab world was both unexpected and welcome, with a number of countries finally moving away from sclerotic authoritarian forms of government and towards more pluralistic and inclusive political systems. The Arab youth taking to the streets to voice their dissatisfaction and hatred for the ruling elites became an inspiration for many on the northern shore of the Mediterranean to protest against the austerity measures and economic policies pursued by their respective governments. Thus, from the "indignados" in Spain promoting a new way of "doing politics" to the violent Greek demonstrations and from the Tunisian youth demanding "dignity, bread and freedom" to ordinary Syrian citizens defying Bashar al-Assad's security services, societies are awakening across the region due to the severe nature of the political and economic crises they face. Notwithstanding the significant popular mobilisation in established democracies to demand a new social contract to face the worst economic crisis since the 1929 depression, there is no doubt that the Arab Spring constitutes the most important event of 2011 and a defining history-changing moment.

However uncertain the outcome of the Arab Spring might be, the changes that took place over 2011 across the Middle East and North Africa seemed to signal to many the awakening of civil society in the face of political authoritarianism in a repeat of what occurred in Eastern Europe in 1989. It follows that the issue of civil society activism as a crucial ingredient of democratisation has resurfaced strongly after a decade of criticism of both the concept from a theoretical perspective and its practical validity in authoritarian systems. It is in the context of what can be termed an inter-paradigm debate that the question of civil society will be analysed in this contribution to explain the extent to which the Arab Spring is the product of civil activism.

The Inter-Paradigm Debate and Civil Society

Until the late 1990s, the dominant approach to studying Arab politics was democratisation or transitology. This meant that scholars and policymakers interpreted events in the region as steps, either forward or backward, on the straight line that inevitably takes countries from authoritarian rule towards the establishment of a liberal-democratic system. Heavily influenced by the transitions in Eastern Europe and Latin America, the paradigm of democratisation was applied to the Middle East and North Africa, where a number of liberal political and economic reforms were indeed being carried out throughout the 1990s. When reforms seemed successful, they were hailed as a step towards the inevitable democratic change that was just around the corner. When reforms failed, they were considered a temporary setback that would in time be rectified so that the country could progress towards democratisation. Over time it became apparent, however, that the

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concepts and expectations of the democratisation literature did not really correlate with the reality on the ground, where authoritarianism was simply being restructured rather than abandoned. Thus, taking their cue from an influential 2002 article by Carothers, who argued that the transition paradigm had ended, scholars of the Arab world focused their attention on the mechanisms that allowed authoritarianism to survive by, paradoxically, introducing apparently liberal reforms.

In this context, both the critiques of the theoretical assumptions of transitology and the empirical evidence showed that the transition paradigm had lost its explanatory power. As mentioned, in the Middle East and North Africa authoritarian rule prevailed, and it became important to attempt to explain the different ways in which such systems had become so resilient and seemingly impenetrable to genuine democratic change. By the early 2000s, the paradigm of authoritarian persistence had begun to replace the democratisation paradigm when it came to explaining political events in the Arab world. Now, the surprising events of the Arab Spring seem to have swung the pendulum back in favour of democratisation insofar as authoritarian rule in the region no longer appears as resilient as it was made out to be. It should be noted, however, that it might be too early for the democratisation literature to dismiss the insights of the paradigm of authoritarian persistence for three reasons. First, it is more than likely that authoritarianism will remain a regional feature for the foreseeable future, particularly in the Gulf. Second, the direction of the political changes taking place in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Libya is extremely unclear, and, while Tunisia has embarked on a process that has led to the creation of a relatively stable pluralistic political system, the same cannot be said for all the other countries. Finally, remaining stuck in a semi-authoritarian limbo is as likely a scenario for many Arab countries as democratisation or authoritarian retrenchment is. In any case, both paradigms are now used, and the inter-paradigm debate simply shows that both approaches offer significant shortcomings and powerful insights. The more general inter-paradigm debate has had profound consequences on the crucial assumptions of both approaches, and civil society has not escaped the resulting increased scrutiny.

The democratisation paradigm gave significant importance to the role of civil activism in regime change, and praise for the role of civil society in setting off the Arab Spring has been widespread since. Increasing civil society activism has always been seen as a necessary component of the challenge that needed to be mounted against authoritarian rule, and, as far back as 2000, Laith Kubba proclaimed that the "awakening of civil society" would lead Arabs to the "promised land" of democratisation just as it had done for Eastern Europe in the 1980s. Specific criticism of this normative liberal and, to some, naïve conceptualisation of civil society accompanied the more general criticism of the democratisation literature. When examining the role of civil society activism, the paradigm of authoritarian persistence argued that it was a very problematic concept from a theoretical and definitional point of view and that its practical application was also much more complex and nuanced than the simplistic dichotomy of a "good" civil society versus a "bad" authoritarian state. In fact, numerous new studies on civil society in general and on civil activism in the Arab world in particular countered the liberal assumptions of transitology. Thus, rather than fostering democratisation, the growth of civil society is perceived to be, at best, ineffective in challenging authoritarianism or, at worst, a mechanism that reproduces authoritarian patterns and that ultimately serves to strengthen authoritarian rule.

Civil Society and the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring and the societal revolt against political authoritarianism have brought the assumptions and insights of both paradigms back to centre stage, but they face a number of significant problems in explaining how civil society might have contributed to the changes taking place in the region. Democratisation studies focused strongly on the presence and activism of liberal-oriented civil society associations struggling for human rights and democracy to argue that they would be able to awaken society and challenge authoritarianism. More significantly, some scholars argued that it was important to include Islamist groups in the definition of civil society and that they were equal participants in the bottom-up effort to counter authoritarian political rule through their many charitable and politicised associations. While superficially it may appear that the Arab Spring vindicates such an approach, it should be emphasised that traditional and long-standing opposition civil society groups, including Islamists, were notably absent from the anti-regime demonstrations, particularly in

Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria. In fact, it can be argued that such associations and groups, which purportedly represented civil activism at its finest, were as surprised as the regimes in place by the extent and determination of the initial anti-regime protests. This applies equally to both the liberal and Islamist sectors of civil society. The case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is quite telling in this respect insofar as the leaders of the association, probably the largest civil society actor in Egypt, were very reluctant to encourage its members to join the early demonstrators and to offer their logistical skills to the uprising. The Brotherhood decided to join in a good few days after the beginning of the protests and seemed to do so because of the pressure brought to bear by its younger members, who were eager to participate. Referring to the Tunisian uprising, the journalist Béchir Ben Yahmed wrote in an editorial for *La Jeune Afrique* that "no party, no union, no politician gave the impetus for this popular uprising nor were they in any way involved," highlighting how minor the involvement of organised civil society groups of all ideological tendencies was. This does not mean that members of traditional civil society groups did not protest: quite the opposite is true. However, their involvement was in a personal capacity rather than out of an official position of the association or associations they belonged to. It follows that democratisation studies might have correctly identified the "power of society" to revolt against authoritarianism as a crucial ingredient for democratic political change, but they failed to identify the actual actors that were able to bring the change about or, at least, initiate it. The sham liberalisation of the authoritarian regimes had, if only rhetorically, allowed for the pluralisation of relations between themselves and wider society, leading to the growth of new civil actors hidden from the mainstream.

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For their part, scholars of authoritarian resilience had correctly accounted for the mechanisms that prevented traditional civil society groups loosely qualified as being in opposition to the regimes in place from mounting a significant challenge. With a mixture of repression, co-optation and divide-and-conquer strategies, regimes had virtually emptied civil society activism of its counter-power abilities. The vast majority of civil society groups had accepted to play by the rules of the regime and largely reproduced the same authoritarian mechanisms of the regimes in their dealings with it and with each other. Again, this was true of both the liberal and Islamist sectors of society. By focusing overwhelmingly on traditional civil society groups and hierarchical and structured organised forms of activism, the paradigm of authoritarian resilience failed to analyse how Arab societies were going through significant changes that were not being captured by traditional associational life. This failure is encapsulated in the manner in which "upgraded authoritarianism" was thought to work. There is no doubt that Heydemann's work on upgrading authoritarianism in the Arab world provides useful analytical insights on the mechanisms that allowed authoritarian regimes to strengthen their hold on power throughout the 1990s and 2000s while seemingly introducing liberal reforms, including the liberalisation of associational life. Where upgraded authoritarianism fails is in its inability to conceive of its unintended consequences. While traditional civil society groups were allowed more space to operate by the regimes in place and were unwittingly used to strengthen authoritarianism, these mechanisms of co-optation and "virtual liberalism" generated different and alternative dynamics of activism that remained somewhat hidden, and it is from these new spaces of activism that the Arab Spring sprang.

New Spaces of Activism

When one accepts that traditional civil society actors have had their role as triggers of political change confiscated, it becomes necessary to examine where the societal rebellion against authoritarianism came from. In order to do this, it is important to broaden the definition of civil society not only by recognising that it should not have an exclusively liberal-normative connotation, but also, more importantly, by realising that it is not solely about formal hierarchical structures and organisations. Civil society activism is more than non-governmental organisations. As Challand recently wrote, "I choose the phrase 'counter-power of civil society' to describe the ongoing developments [in the Arab world] because I believe

that there is more to civil society than its organised form. There is more to civil society than NGOs and the developmental approach which imagines that the key to progress is when donors, the UN or rich countries, give aid to boost non-state actors, in particular NGOs, in the developing south." In this respect the concept of "activated citizenship," although admittedly fluid and only recently introduced in studies of civil society activism under authoritarian constraints, could potentially be useful insofar as it highlights how classic civil society activism with its emphasis on formal organisations and structures is unable to capture the complexity of how society "expresses" itself. It indicates that engagement with significant political, social and economic issues does not only occur through formal structures and that in authoritarian systems individual citizens with little open access can mobilise on their own and then use their social networks, both on- and offline, to live a reality of opposition, as illustrated by Bayat.

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Thus, there are plenty of other modes of engagement that can emerge to challenge authoritarian rule, ranging from individual writings to mass participation to non-political events to artistic expression. All of these modes of engagement can then be activated when specific events or "triggers," such as the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, occur. A considerable degree of civil engagement and activism in different forms from the traditional ones was taking place before the spark occurred, and this testifies to society's vitality, even under the repressive authoritarian measures of the regimes in power.

The Main Features of the Arab Spring

When one looks at the main features of the initial impetus for the Arab Spring, three elements stand out and provide an explanation as to why and how wider society confronted authoritarianism outside the expected parameters of civil activism.

The first element is the youth factor. The Arab Spring is very much the product of the rebellion of young Arabs frustrated with the state of their country and the lack of opportunities for a better future. The youth factor is particularly significant because older generation activists, particularly in the secular sector of society, had been scathing in their condemnation of the youth, which had seemed to them only to care about consumerism or personal religious piety and to have little interest in politics and civil activism. In many ways, the youth of the Arab world had been written off as potential actors of change because of their apparent "apolitical" interests. Furthermore, those who did take an active interest in civil activism were very often doing so outside traditional party affiliations and outside long-established civil society groups, privileging the creation of their own ad hoc committees with variable membership. For instance, in an investigative report on civil activism in Morocco, *La Jeune Afrique* notes that "whereas the older generation of militants fought for democracy and political freedoms, [the new generation of militants] fights for the rights of every individual to act according to his or her own free will." It is these new activists, seemingly apolitical and focused on individualistic issues, who were able to mobilise the rest of their peers, and this mobilisation succeeded precisely because it was apparently apolitical and non-ideological. During the demonstrations in Tunis, Cairo, Benghazi, Alexandria, Damascus, Sana and Algiers, the absence of ideological slogans and chants was noticeable. There were no calls for socialism or US-style liberal-democracy, but simply for the dictators to go and for the arrival of some sort of change. The Arab youth felt disconnected not only from the regimes and their authoritarian and corrupt practices, but also from the tired and older opposition leaders who had compromised with the regime or been absent from the public scene. Not even the Islamist slogans of the past, such as "Islam is the solution," appeared on the streets. The Islamist alternative as conceived before the Arab Spring and institutionalised in traditional Islamist groupings could not energise a younger generation.

This new, seemingly apolitical youth-driven brand of activism had three paradoxical advantages over the traditional one. Whereas most politicised activists who were members of political parties or partisan civil society groups had failed for decades to create sustainable and effective anti-regime coalitions, the new unaffiliated activists were much more ideologi-

cally flexible and therefore capable of creating efficient coalitions and involving a greater number of people precisely because there were no ideological battles to be fought. The difficulties of coalition-building in the Arab world due to ideological differences, particularly between Islamists and secularists but also as a result of conflicts within each camp, are well documented and have long undermined efforts to challenge authoritarianism, allowing regimes to exploit such divergences and adopt divide-and-conquer strategies to remain in power. In the lead-up to and during the demonstrations, there were no ideological conflicts to overcome, and young people from different social classes, from non-political backgrounds and with widely diverging political and religious beliefs, if they had any at all, came together in the name of very simple objectives that everyone could support: dignity, bread and freedom. Divisions on how to realise the objectives of the uprising would be left for the aftermath of their victory. The second advantage of the absence of political affiliation was the creation of a diffuse leadership. It is quite telling that the Arab Spring, unlike the Polish or Czechoslovakian uprisings of the 1980s, does not have recognised and recognisable leaders. While prominent young people were behind the organisation of the early protests and the mobilisation efforts in each Arab country throughout the uprisings, their leadership was very much lacking in hierarchy and was marked by a high degree of decentralisation, with new voices being added constantly. This diffuse leadership stands in stark contrast to the past, when anti-colonial or nationalist struggles were highly dependent on a charismatic leader capable of mobilising people through the power of his rhetoric and message. Nothing of the sort occurred during the Arab Spring, when, in fact, the paternalism of old opposition leaders attempting to ride the wave of the revolution was wholly rejected in all the squares across the region. The third advantage of the absence of political affiliation has been the practical impossibility for the security forces to utilise repression effectively by arresting, "disappearing" or physically eliminating an easily identifiable leadership: such a leadership simply was not there. Thus, the mobilisation of a seemingly apolitical youth that was not affiliated with any specific political movement or civil society group and was disconnected from rigid ideological debates and programmes succeeded where older activists had failed for decades, leading to the temporary triumph of "apolitical" society, as recently noted by Dalmasso.

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The second element is related to the means through which mobilisation and activism took place. While the Arab uprisings are not "Twitter revolutions" insofar as street mobilisation and face-to-face social networks were crucial, there is little doubt about the importance of online activism both before and during the actual uprisings. Again, this type of activism was not believed to be particularly significant before the uprisings, yet people in the region had taken to the web with great enthusiasm to discuss all sorts of matters as it seemed to be the only open space available to them to discuss social, economic and political issues. The regimes obviously policed the Internet and social media precisely because they felt they were threatening and would not likely have bothered with them if they had thought they were harmless. The important point here is that the closure of all free spaces of discussion and confrontation and the inability of most civil society groups to effect genuine change led a significant number of individuals to discuss, vent and offer solutions through new technologies and social media. This individual activated citizenship might have been uncoordinated and confusing for some time, but when coupled with offline street mobilisation, it provided three vital advantages for demonstrators. First, it enabled a very rapid exchange of information among activists, who could communicate online and establish meeting points and activities to be undertaken in real time with none of the delays that prevented more formal and hierarchical organisations from acting quickly. In many ways, social media and new technologies were the perfect means for politically unaffiliated youth acting first in concert without ever having really developed offline social trust. The second advantage resides in the ability activists had to counter the regime's propaganda, particularly when it came to the external consumption of news. Authoritarian regimes had always managed to survive thanks in

part to their ability to curtail unofficial and unsanctioned discourses about the reality on the ground. New technologies and social media instead allowed counter-discourses to emerge and be disseminated, fundamentally undermining the monopoly on truth that the regimes counted on. Despite the shutdowns, blockages and filters that the security services put in place, the flow of information seemed to be constant, with activists finding ways to get around obstacles. Finally, the third advantage lay in the consolidation of a transnational Arab public opinion, which enabled the quick spread of contagious ideas and means of mobilisation across the region. Thus, while a nuanced judgement is required regarding the revolutionary role of social media and new technologies, they were an important element in popularising a type of activism based on individual contributions to online debates that has hitherto been under-examined. Bloggers became the new security threat, and, while their writings might not have been as widely distributed or read, the sheer amount of information helped to keep the uprising going, as did the repression. Once the wall of fear crumbled, even the repression seemed to be an incentive to continue with the protests rather than a deterrent.

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The third element was the revival of trade unionism, which was a surprising twist the Arab Spring had to offer in terms of activism. In a recent analysis, Samir Aita argued that the social and economic inequalities created in the Arab world over the last two decades by the liberalisation of the economy according to neo-liberal doctrine are the root causes of the uprisings and the desire for change and that this factor has been, and remains, more important than political and democratic demands. While one need not agree entirely with Aita's view regarding the minor role of political demands in the uprisings, there is no doubt that socio-economic demands have been central to the Arab Spring or that they re-energised trade unionism, which could no longer be satisfied with economic concessions as penury and declining living standards were no longer perceived to be a purely managerial issue, but rather a clear systemic and political one. Two important points need to be made in this respect. First, trade union activism against declining living standards, worsening pay conditions and managers' corruption and mismanagement had been a feature of Arab politics for some years before the uprising. Tunisian workers in Gafsa and Egyptian ones in Malhalla had been protesting and demonstrating to defend workers' rights for a number of years, and this was the case across the region, from Algeria to Jordan. This indicates that the groundwork of political contestation had already been laid before December 2010 but was largely ignored by numerous scholars and policymakers because it seemed to be simply a very manageable and confused reaction from the "losers" of globalisation due to the absence of clear political affiliations on the part of the workers that could be seen as threatening for the regimes' stability. This attitude proved to be mistaken insofar as socio-economic demands were actually linked to the necessity for wider political changes and were then picked up by younger activists and students, thereby creating a bridge between two different social groups. The Arab Spring can probably trace its success to this connection. Second, it should be kept in mind that the revitalisation of trade unionism is largely due to local activists at the coalface of workers' increased disaffection with the system rather than to the national bosses of the unions, who had been compromised by co-optation. In Tunisia, the early mobilisation was thus centred around the local branches of the UGTT.

These three key features of the activism of the Arab Spring are necessarily interconnected and highlight the distance between it and traditional civil society activism.

Conclusion

Rather than offering empirical confirmation of the power of civil society to bring about democratic change in authoritarian contexts, the Arab Spring calls for a profound rethinking of the definition, normative conceptualisation and concrete application of the term. In particular, the overwhelming focus on hierarchical organised structures such as non-governmental organisations should be revisited in light of

new spaces of activism that were created during the age of upgraded authoritarianism. This does not mean that activated citizenship or individual engagement alone explain the Arab Spring as, without a broader structure in place, mobilisation on the scale seen during the Arab Spring could not have occurred. For example, the experience and structures put in place by local union activists in the strikes of the mid-2000s in both Egypt and Tunisia or the online activities against specific governmental policies or police brutality served as the groundwork for coordinating the much broader mass mobilisation of 2011. The point is simply that structures are necessary, but the ones that were crucial during the Arab Spring were not the ones that traditional civil society groups had in place. It follows that there are three aspects in particular that need to be better thought out.

First, the arrival on the scene of new actors such as individual bloggers or revitalised trade unionism challenges received notions of what constitutes civil society, as the focus on traditional actors nominally engaged in favour of democracy and human rights proved to be misplaced in light of their inability to effect change. In this respect, it is interesting to note that it is in wider society, where less formal and looser ties between politically unaffiliated youths are formed, that one finds democratising potential. Such potential thus has to rely on specific resources to be successful and, during the Arab Spring, such resources were available in the guise of the extent of the popular protests and their superior morality due to their peaceful nature. In addition, the participation of a middle class growing tired of the predatory behaviour of capitalists linked to the regime provided the material resources to sustain the movement; where such a decision by the middle to join in the protests is absent or minoritarian, failure is in the cards. Second, the means through which activism takes place today have enhanced the role of activated citizens who might find no audience for quite some time, but, when the timing proves right, are immediately connected to other like-minded people leading to the formation of ad hoc structures with no hierarchy and a diffuse leadership that can act quickly and escape state control because of its fluidity. This has changed activism itself and not only its means of engagement. Finally, there is the need to reassess the importance of socio-economic issues and how they can create a type of activism that spills over into politics. The re-energising of trade unionism has made scholars and policymakers rediscover a type of activism that seemed destined to the sin bin of history and that instead proved to be decisive in provoking political change.

The societal rebellion against authoritarian rule in the Arab world has looked very different from those that took place in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the 1980s and indicates a real change in civil activism that needs to be accounted for. It is this activism that will keep watch on the political developments in a changing Arab world in which political parties' activists are beginning to replace the revolutionary youth. The Arab Spring is by no means the death knell of traditional activism as the post-revolutionary situation in Tunisia and Egypt suggests, with the proliferation of non-governmental associations and groups intent on promoting their objectives, but it is incumbent on the scholarly community and on policymakers to rethink activism so as to include new forms and new actors, particularly when analysing similarly authoritarian contexts.

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