Why has the Arab uprisings failed to produce sustainable democratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa?

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The Arab Uprisings, commonly known as the Arab Spring, were a revolutionary wave of political protests throughout North Africa and the Middle East in 2011 that aimed to end authoritarian and military rule. What started as a street vendor's self-immolation in Tunisia quickly inspired mass demonstrations of unprecedented scope, calling for democratic reforms across the region (Bellin, 2012, pp. 127). The essay question presupposes the Arab Spring's inefficacy in achieving and consolidating democratic regime change; this is supported by the declining EIU Democracy Index score for the MENA region. The study aggregates findings from five criteria to determine a state's adherence to democratic principles and recorded an average regional score of 3.43 in 2010 before the Arab Uprisings and, most recently, 3.23 in 2023 (Economist, 2023). Although some movements were successful in the initial phase of democratisation and removing authoritarian rulers, many regressed to new forms of autocracy. Similarly, others now exist as partial or illiberal democracies with regimes lacking one or more core democratic features (Newton & Van Deth, 2021, pp. 66). Sustainable "embedded democracy" (pp. 67) maintains frequent, free, and fair elections alongside the prevalence of civil and political liberties for all civilians. The process of transforming political systems to embedded democracies, democratisation, can be hindered or wholly reversed at any stage. Hence, this essay aims to examine the critical juncture of Arab Uprisings to highlight the possible reasons behind the failure of sustainable democratic political reform in the MENA region. This will be investigated by exploring military repression and defection, leadership shortcomings in transition processes, and the influence of international involvement or lack thereof. Using examples from across the region, the paper will reference the cases of Bahrain, Libya, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia, while making comparisons to examples from the Central and Eastern European Revolutions of 1989.

Firstly, the low institutionalisation of coercive apparatus, specifically the military, significantly influenced the persistence of authoritarianism and the obstacles to democratisation following the Arab Uprisings. Much of the Arab Spring's movements were unsuccessful in the emerging phase of democratisation (Newton & Van Deth, 2021, pp. 67) by failing to remove or replace undemocratic systems due to vehement military repression of the protests. The disruption of mass mobilisation in 2011 overwhelmed the regular policing capabilities of most Arab countries; thus, authoritarian durability in the region relied on the military's capacity to deploy coercive force to quell the protests (Bellin, 2012, pp. 131). In many Arab countries, authoritarian regimes are deeply entrenched within the military institution through a patrimonial organisation - where familial, ethnic, or sectarian identity directly influences military standing and power (Fawcett, 2019, pp. 134). In countries like Bahrain, military leaders were closely aligned with the Sunni-Muslim royal family and bolstered by assistance from the predominantly Sunni Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Bellin, 2012, pp. 135). This distinct sectarian division from Bahraini Shia protestors, who were aligned with Iran, led to military support of the monarch and brutal repression of civilian demonstrators who were framed to be posing a national threat (pp. 136). Consequently, efforts for democratic reform were promptly suppressed, and the Al Khalifa family remains in power today.

Patrimonial systems can also be observed in Libya in Syria, where the military fractured along tribal and sectarian profile lines. Units of Benghazi-lineage defected and abstained from engaging with civilian protests in Benghazi, while other units remained loyal to safeguarding General Gaddafi's four-decade rule (Andreson, 2011, pp. 6). In contrast, Bashar al-Asad in Syria has exploited sectarian division to his advantage by delegating power to the Alawi-Muslim Shia sect. With all senior positions in the army belonging to Alawis, he can guarantee control over the

coercive forces despite desertions and defections among non-Alawi rank-and-file soldiers (Bellin, 2012, pp. 133). More importantly, the two strongest military units are controlled by Asad's brother and cousin, who did not hesitate to use brutal force and even chemical weapons to subdue civilian dissent (Norton, 2019, pp. 152). Hence, when the extent of the military leadership's national authority becomes contingent upon the stability and continuation of the regime, the loyalty of coercive forces, and in turn, their will to use violent force on behalf of the ruling elite, is very strong. This profound entrenchment of authoritarianism in Arab countries posed significant challenges for oppositional forces seeking to tilt the political balance and establish sustainable democratic regimes.

However, countries where protests successfully ousted authoritarian leaders ultimately struggled to establish democratic governance despite having highly institutionalised militaries. Countries like Egypt and Tunisia, where coercive forces are largely independent entities with clear delineation from the regime, rather than being patrimonially organised, witnessed military defection (Herd, 2011, 104). When confronted with tens of thousands of peaceful protestors in Tahrir Square and Habib Bourguiba Avenue, respectively, General Tantawi of Egypt and General Amar of Tunisia did not mobilise lethal force against civilian demonstrations (Bellin, 2012, 132). In cases where the interests of the military are not interlinked with the longevity of the regime, it allows them to prioritise their own institutional interests over upholding the autocracy. Hence, concerns about maintaining internal cohesion, national legitimacy as a security force, and public image and civilian support became more important. Despite this, the current democratic status of both nation-states is disputed, alluding to the presence of other obstacles in the subsequent stages of democratisation.

Weak leadership and the exclusion of elite interests in the post-revolutionary period thwarted peaceful power transitions in Egypt. This is especially evident as mass national protests led to a military coup against the newly elected Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood party in 2013 (Norton, 2019, pp. 158). Following chaotic democratic elections, in which Morsi won 52% of the votes, the Brotherhood-dominated parliament elected a constituent assembly that would draft Egypt's post-revolutionary constitution and set a precedent for a new democratic regime (Hinnebusch, 2015, pp. 361). However, 66 of the assembly's 100 seats represented Islamist parties; meanwhile, only six seats were occupied by women and five by Coptic Christians, the Christian minority which constitutes 10% of Egypt's population (Ghanem, 2016, pp. 15). This lack of power-sharing and reduction of political competition posed concerning implications for Egypt's democratisation and foreshadowed a regression to autocracy. These concerns were realized after a seven-article constitutional declaration by Morsi "effectively ended parliamentary or judicial oversight, giving him unlimited dictatorial power" (pp. 17). In doing so, the nation faced a new authoritarian rule that aimed to suspend checks and balances and accountability mechanisms while retaining the majority of parliamentary power. Beyond institutional structures, democracy is also built upon citizens' ideal and material interests (Newton & Van Deth, 2021, pp. 61). Consequently, growing dissatisfaction with the new regime's policies and unresolved economic disparities inspired further regime change. Hence, although the Arab Spring was initially successful in ousting the Mubarak regime, as Egypt neared the "advanced phase of democratisation" (pp. 64) and attention shifted towards the achievements and shortcomings of the new democracy, the revolutionary movement failed to recognise democratic reforms that met the population's initial demands and expectations.

It is crucial to note that in its attempt to overthrow the Muslim Brotherhood and regain stability, Egypt succumbed to a new repressive regime. After leading the military to depose Morsi, Field Marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sisi won the presidency in 2014 with 97% of the vote and declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation (Norton, 2019, pp. 148). He also convicted and violently suppressed thousands of pro-Morsi protestors at the start of his reign (Hinnebusch, 2015, pp. 362). Sisi remains in power today after being re-elected into his third term with 89.6% of the votes. Still, the election, where Sisi faced no real opposition, has been largely criticised, with Reuters reporters witnessing cash distributed near polling stations (Saafan and Lewis, 2023). Eliminating political rivals and utilising bribery as a form of incentivisation in elections undermines the legitimacy of competitive democratic elections - a core feature of a functioning democracy. Indicating that Egypt is a competitive authoritarian regime (Lindstaedt, 2023, pp. 104) which routinely holds elections that are not entirely free and fair and favour the incumbent. Rutherford argues that the nature of repression inflicted by Sisi differs from that of his predecessors and is "more vulnerable to violence and insurgency" (Rutherford, 2018, pp. 186). The imminent fragility of authoritarian regimes due to preference falsification implies the possibility of further democratising political contention in Egypt.

Comparing the Arab Spring to similar critical junctures in history, such as the Central and Eastern European Revolutions of 1989, can allow for the identification of flaws and absent democratising factors in the Arab uprisings. The main shortcoming of both of the Egyptian attempts at democratic reform following the Arab Uprisings was the absence of a pro-reform elite consensus. Failure to provide the previous regime's elites and supporters with a platform to advocate for their interests in the new administration can often lead to the prevalence of conflict and political violence during the transition period - as observed at the onset of Morsi and Sisi's governance. This is one of the main distinguishers between the - largely unsuccessful - Arab Uprisings of 2011 and the - largely successful- Central and Eastern European Revolutions of 1989. The Central and Eastern European Revolutions represented the end of state socialism in Eastern Europe and constituted a large part of the third wave of democratisation (Huntington, 1993, pp. 16). In Hungary and Poland, Communist elites and parts of the opposition facilitated the establishment of a multiparty democracy at roundtable talks (Mark, 2019, pp. 110. These new networks of "transitional elites" were able to balance the realignment towards liberal democratic values and a free market capitalist economy with existing frameworks. In doing so, the revolutionary leaders and former elites could ensure an orderly transition of power.

Finally, the absence of support from influential international actors diminished the momentum of Arab democratisation movements. Though largely nationalist movements, these domestic calls for reform did not exist in a vacuum alienated from global forces. The widespread regional diffusion of sudden radical socio-political mobilisation highlights how external influence can profoundly alter power dynamics by reversing the depoliticisation of public spheres, which was long considered an underpinning feature of the Arab world (Norton, 2019, pp. 135). Nonetheless, democratic forces received minimal support from global powers such as the US and EU, who hesitated to compromise the "security and stability of allied authoritarian regimes [and] given [it] priority over democratisation" (Hinnebusch, 2015, pp. 341). The United States largely ignored advocates for liberalised policies in Saudi Arabia, since encouraging destabilising large-scale protests against the Saudi regime would increase the price of oil and negatively influence Western

economies (Herd, 2011, pp. 114). Thus, without international pressure, Saudi Arabia implemented 36 billion dollars worth of new funding and subsidies (Norton, 2019, pp. 134) to address domestic concerns without granting further civil or political liberties. On the other hand, Syrian uprisings suffered from the simultaneous lack of pro-democratic international involvement and intervention by other authoritarian regimes. Whereas the United States was restrained in its support for Syrian protestors, Russia and China provided extensive support to the al-Asad regime (pp. 151). This included sending troops and utilising their veto power in the United Nations Security Council to prevent multiple UN resolutions that aimed to address the unlawful use of force against Syrian civilians (Bellin, 2012, pp. 140). Bashar al-Asad's regime was very powerful at the start of the Arab uprisings; therefore, the absence of sufficient international support for pro-democratic forces, coupled with authoritarian solidarity from Russian and Chinese support, further tilted the equilibrium in his favour and led to the failure of establishing a democratic regime in Syria.

Contrastingly, the revolutions of Soviet states and satellite states occurred in a time period that lent international legitimacy and support to their movements. The most significant historical backdrop of these revolutions was the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union and the weakening of the USSR following their defeat in Afghanistan. Amongst Western European and British support of the protests, the CIA and Vatican funded the liberal-left Solidarność political grouping in Poland, which eventually successfully hosted semi-free elections in the spring of 1989 (Mark, 2019, pp. 32). US interests in supporting Polish democratisation efforts were heavily interlinked with a desire to weaken the Soviet sphere of influence and increase the dominance of liberal free market economies. On the other hand, Vatican support was built upon an opposition to the totalitarian limitations posed by Soviet Socialism to the predominantly Catholic Polish population (Ther, 2016, pp. 54). Hence, the successful consolidation of liberal democracies requires sufficient support from influential international actors. However, international intervention and support must offer strategic advantages that align with the interventionary power's foreign interests. Despite this, it is important to note that Poland has faced democratic backsliding under the populist right-wing PiS, Law and Justice party (Rohac, 2016, pp. 9), which was recently defeated in national elections.

In conclusion, the Arab Uprisings of 2011 represented a critical juncture for Middle Eastern and North African countries that proposed optimistic plans for a democratic region. Unfortunately, the movements were widely unsuccessful in achieving political reform due to the interaction of many factors. Many countries, like Bahrain, Libya and Syria, failed to oust their authoritarian leaders due to the use of repressive military force. Whereas Tunisia and Egypt faced shortcomings in the later stages of democratisation, with Egypt regressing to autocracy after weak leadership and ineptly handling the transition of power. Moreover, Saudi and Syrian democratic movements were especially hindered by a lack of adequate international support from influential global actors like the US and EU. In contrast, the revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 achieved significant success, partially because they received substantial international support and employed pro-reform elite consensus to facilitate a peaceful transition of power. Although the various nations which experienced the Arab Spring had autocratic or non-democratic regimes, it is important to acknowledge that each nation-state had its own unique political climate and governance systems. Authoritarianism is an elastic concept that encompasses all non-democratic political systems and may not apply in the same capacity to all countries in the MENA region. Therefore, even though there were some observable trends of common obstacles and flaws to the Arab Uprisings, a more

careful state-specific analysis must be conducted to determine the agents of failure which prevented these movements from producing sustainable democratic regimes in the Middle East and North Africa.

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