Arab transitions: late departure, destination unknown

by Florence Gaub

To the chagrin of many, Arab countries did not make the transition to democracy as expected. Then again, *transitology* (essentially the study of political change) never offered a straightforward formula or magical recipe for the birth, and survival, of democracy – Arab or otherwise. Of the 90 countries which initiated transitions in the last 50 years, 46% transitioned to democracy within three years; 39% returned to autocracy; and 15% moved gradually to democracy over the course of roughly a decade. But what does this imply for the future of Arab political systems?

Transitology explained

Although theories about democracy abound in political science, it remains unclear under what precise circumstances it arrives and stays. In the 1950s, modernisation theory pointed to a link between economic equality and democratic change, but the causal direction remains murky. Theories focusing on political agents as carriers of change, appearing in the 1960s, looked at the role of different societal actors such as the working class – but their prescriptive assumptions on why certain actors prefer one system over another were disproven in several cases. Research in the 1970s and 1980s argued that democracy emerges as a negotiated solution of different groups and, consequently, creates an equilibrium beneficial to everyone – but it failed to explain under what circumstances groups come to this conclusion. Publications such as Samuel Huntington's *Third Wave* do not even seek to build a theory explaining why and how democracy arrives – and some even went as far as to say that some cultures, like the Arab one, are simply incompatible with democracy.

What is certain about political change to (and from) democracy is this: more often than not, it is the product of a crisis. The very word crisis comes from the Greek *krisis*, meaning *decision*: although often thought of as a time of trouble, it is also a time when difficult or important decisions must be made. Consequently, political change usually occurs as a result of an economic and political crisis – which, statistically, is slightly more likely to produce a non-democracy. The economic dimension must not be underestimated: in 28 out of 39 cases where democracy died, a fall in incomes had occurred in the two years preceding the event.

The economy played a role in the recent Arab upheavals, too: Egyptian food inflation stood at 19% in 2010; the prices of staple foods such as dairy, fats/oils and fruits went from declining, respectively, by 9%, 3%, and 1% in January 2010

to increasing by 27%, 28%, and 14% in January 2011. In the case of Syria, water resources dwindled by 50% between 2006 and 2011 because of a drought, pushing two to three million people into extreme poverty. At the same time, diesel prices tripled as the Syrian government began to cut subsidies for fertiliser and fuel as part of the country's transition towards a market economy. Living costs rose sharply as real wage growth fell from 9.9% in 2005 to 3.2% in 2007, and in 2009, the cost of basic foods such as fruit and vegetables rose by around 27%.

Some political scientists believe that pronounced economic inequality creates an incentive for democratic reform. In this reading, the poor in a very unequal system will push for democracy – which they prefer due to its redistributive nature – whereas elites, with so much to lose, will push back. Societies where the gap between rich and poor is pronounced – and where the middle class is small – are particularly likely to oscillate between populist uprisings and authoritarian regimes. In fact, the transitory state between autocracy and democracy has its own name: 'anocracy'.

Arab countries are notorious for their levels of income inequality: in 2010, 47.9% of Tunisia's income was controlled by 20% of the population, with the bottom 20% owning just 5.7%. In Egypt, the richest 20% held 41.5% of the national income, whereas the lowest 20% possessed a mere 9%. But a closer look reveals that things are more complex, and that monocausal explanations do not sufficiently explain the uprisings. The existence of such inequality is in itself *not* a cause of unrest: unequal distribution of income is, for example, worse in most Latin American and several African states. Despite pervasive inequality and poverty, and the existence of extensive democratic deficits, until 2011 the Arab world was the region with the lowest rate of regime change.

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In other words, the onset of a crisis is not enough to bring about democratic change. But what else is needed? Some 'transitologists' believe that democracy arrives once elites and the middle class make the rational choice that repressing working class demands for democracy is simply too costly. Conversely, authoritarian structures emerge when one or two groups have the capability to repress the remainder of the population; only when democracy is the best option for all three groups (or indeed, the least bad one), does it emerge as a complex system of consensus. Tunisia, where an alliance of all components of society (lawyers, trade unionists, employers, as well as human rights activists) saved the transition, is a good example of such an occurrence.

So, what is democracy?

Although democracy has proliferated worldwide throughout the 20th century, it has, so far, failed to fully establish itself in the Arab world. But why would democracy be the first choice in the first place? Although today's democratic discourse focuses extensively on political freedom, democracy – as a system – is essentially about participation. Perhaps most importantly, democracy is a promise that the system will remain in place, as it establishes provisions for how the government will change.

Stemming from the Greek *dēmokratia*, democracy means *rule by the people*. In essence, it seeks to establish a system in which the greatest number of people are involved in the political decision-making process. But beyond this, there are no agreed definitions on how to translate this concept into reality, as most states today are simply too large in size and population to allow for a direct democracy literally involving every individual, and therefore have to be representative by default.

There are several hundred definitions of democracy, and with no single version universally agreed on, a plethora of different systems exists which define themselves as 'democratic'. Accordingly, whether a system is a constitutional monarchy or a republic, has a parliament with one or two chambers, a head of state with or without executive powers, a centralised or decentralised administration, a federal or unitary or unwritten constitution, it can still be considered democratic. Democracy is not defined by the form its political institutions take, but by the practices it comes with.

How democracy as an ideal is translated into actual politics very much depends on the national 'political culture' – and needs to take historical and cultural aspects into account if the system is to remain stable.

Political science generally defines democracy as a state in which genuine competition for power exists, mass participation on a legally equal footing takes place, general deliberations on policy occur,

and political liberties restrict the state's powers. Elections alone are not enough: Egypt under Nasser, for instance, can qualify as an authoritarian democracy, although it lacked the genuine participation of the people and competition of ideas. Similarly, Iraq under Maliki is witnessing an increasing concentration of power in the prime minister's office, which runs contrary to the democratic principle of checks and balances.

Democracy not only has many faces in terms of structure: there are also different interpretations of what it is supposed to achieve. Liberal democracy, for instance, focuses mainly on political liberties; procedural democracy puts elections of representatives at the core of its system; social democracy can be understood either as a liberal democratic political system flanked by a socialist economic system (one where the people/state decide over economic complexes), or indeed as a system with extensive welfare and collective bargaining e.g. between employers and employees.

Several other ideas for democratic systems have emerged over time, such as Christian democracy; consociational democracy, where not the majority rules but a complex system attempting to engage almost everyone (as in Lebanon); deliberative democracy, which focuses on consensual decision-making via deliberation rather than voting; 'ochlocracy', in which the masses rule in a demagogic manner (the tyranny of the majority); or even non-partisan democracy, which votes without political parties (a system on the rise in Libya and Egypt). In practice, most democratic systems incorporate several different elements of these schools of thought – depending on their national leaning.

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... and why does it sometimes die?

But democracy, once established, will not last if it does not prove to be the best possible system for its citizens. In that, it is measured against the main functions of a state, namely the delivery of security, welfare and representation. Although democracy arguably delivers on representation, its ability to provide the other two core functions – security and welfare – will also determine its survival. Political systems can survive if they deliver on only two out of three, but states will face unrest – whether democratic or otherwise – when they deliver only on one, or indeed none. The 18th century slogan 'no taxation without representation' echoes the idea that even authoritarian systems willing to extort money from their citizens need to deliver something in return – and serves as an explanation for why 'rentier' economies (such as the Gulf states) tend to be autocratic systems.

Where an authoritarian system delivers on security and welfare – as Iraq did, for example, until the late 1980s – it will be less challenged than a democratic system delivering neither, even though it puts strict limitations on political pluralism (parties, institutions), curtails political mobilisation (as well as other liberties), and bases its legitimacy on emotion. Generally speaking, democratic systems are no more likely to deliver on security and welfare in the medium term than authoritarian ones. In the long run, however, democracies are less likely to go to war with each other and boast higher levels of economic development.

The Arab Spring was ultimately the result of states not providing for their citizens: governments had delivered on security but not on representation, and had provided sufficient welfare to ensure the population's loyalty until food prices shot up over the course of 2010. They had long delivered on two out of three of the aforementioned functions, but were challenged once the economy slid into crisis. Whether or not the newly emerged systems in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya will entrench themselves will largely depend on their performance in these three areas.

Crucially, the reasons which led to the uprisings of 2011 have not disappeared: in fact, they have gotten worse. Food prices today have returned to the levels of 2010, and security has turned into a major problem (murder rates in Egypt have tripled, and incidences of armed robbery have increased tenfold). Terrorism – be it in Iraq, Libya, Egypt or Tunisia – is also mushrooming into a large-scale regional issue. Arab states, regardless of their political system, will now have to deliver fast or face further unrest.

Another hurdle is that certain groups in society tend to favour authoritarian structures. Elites do so, generally, as they are reluctant to share the wealth and power which they exclusively control. The middle class – which in the Arab world consists mainly of employees of security institutions

or the public sector – is a quintessential swing voting group (just like the armed forces), alternating between democracy and authoritarianism. Declared by Greek philosopher Aristotle to be a key component of democracy, the middle class is not a supporter of the system by default. Where the middle class perceives democracy as a means to protect its status, it will be in favour; however, where democracy evolves so as to threaten their economic interests, the middle class tends to back authoritarian systems. Finally, because of its redistributive nature (even in its most liberal form), the masses tend to prefer democratic systems over authoritarian ones.

'Arabocracy': what next?

Contrary to widespread belief, neither the Arab culture nor Islam are obstacles to democracy. Islamic theology does not advocate authoritarianism, and Islam, ultimately subject to interpretation, has not prevented the establishment of democracy in Turkey or Indonesia, for example. Whilst it is true that the *Murji'ite* school of thought promoted the unquestioned support of even an unjust leader, and the *Ash'arite* preferred a strong ruler over anarchy (not to mention Shiite belief in the infallibility of the imam), other movements – such as the *Kharijites* – rejected these forms of obedience.

Arab culture, which can be defined as hierarchical and collectivist, is often seen as the other potential explanation for the region's autocratic tendencies – but other states (in Asia and Europe) with similar approaches to hierarchy and collectivism have transited to democracy anyway. Arab authoritarianism and its persistence are therefore better explained by the existence of 'rentier' economies, the lack of modernisation, colonial history, and regional spillover effects.

Arab political systems in transition will have to define what kind of society they want to achieve, and within which framework they want to do so. For Arab democracies to institutionalise themselves, in particular, several choices have to be made – not only on their general emphasis (liberal, social, procedural etc.) but also on how the system takes into account national, historical, and cultural peculiarities.

Simply copying other systems will not lead to stability, and statistics show that centralised and presidential systems may be more vulnerable to authoritarian backlash. In any case, the time of transition is a particularly delicate balancing act: as democracy needs to emerge from consensus, systems based on a 'winner takes all' principle (where 51% of the vote is enough to control 100% of the system) are often subject to a rollback. Since this type of system hands power to the biggest group in numerical terms, elites and the middle class are generally overruled by the popular majority. Fearful of having no say in the decision-making process, these groups may then attempt to restore a previous system which worked more to their advantage. The problem here is that where democracy is not yet established, uncertainty over the future leads to zero-sum thinking: all groups involved will attempt to sideline the others for fear of being suppressed.

One area where Arab transitioning systems can improve on is political parties. Albeit not a precondition for democracy, parties are instrumental in translating mass demands into concrete proposals, acting as a sort of conveyor belt between citizens and government. So far, Arab political parties have failed to come up with solutions, producing instead mere wish lists. It is no coincidence that Egypt's President al-Sisi is not tied to a political party, instead fighting – and winning – the elections based on his personality.

Where parties help shape the national debate, vet and select candidates, and propose solutions and visions for society, they can contribute to a system which is more representative of the people living in it. For this, they will need to tune in more into what their respective citizens want – and develop a vision on how to achieve it.

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