

The Arab Spring: when democracy meets global protest*

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Not so many events attracted the scholarly debate and the attention of the wide public as the Arab Spring¹ did in the last couple of years. The wave of popular protests that started in Tunisia in January 2011 and then spread all over the Arab world unsettled decades of stability of the Arab authoritarian regimes. Inevitably, many Political Science assumptions have been discussed, rediscovered, or challenged. In the short-term this revival of democracy studies has led to a flourishing of books, international seminars and conference panels. In the mid- to long-term the discipline will have to draw from these events to elaborate new paradigms. Some suggestions are here provided, aiming to open a focus of discussion that can profit of the on-line distribution of IPS.

Many sub-fields of the discipline have investigated these events challenging or supporting widely accepted claims. This article aims at highlighting the emerging trends in the academic debate. First of all, the 2011 Arab revolutionary wave challenged the assumption of the so-called 'Arab exceptionalism'² and provided evidence for those IR scholars that explain democratization as a global process. Studies on democracy as a global issue deny that Middle East and North African (MENA) countries are destined to remain untouched by democratic processes, for cultural or other reasons. According to the Globalist Approach, instead, democratization – being a global process – will eventually involve the MENA countries in the medium or long-term. Secondly, a widely shared conceptual definition of democracy is being investigated. A (Western) value-laden definition of democracy is being progressively replaced by a procedural concept of democracy, which stresses the functioning of a political system ensuring democratic rules and norms instead of (culturally imbued) principles. Many scholars of political theory are re-discussing the ontological definition of democracy, taking also into account the delicate role (if any) of the Islamic religion. Thirdly, the literature on transnational social movements is exploring social movement networks and demonstrations against national governments and policies, to grasp the linkage between the transnational dimension of the protest and its effectiveness at domestic level. Finally, the literature on democratization is arguing *again* about the positive sum game between domestic actors and the international dimension.

1. Global Democracy and the need to overcome the 'Arab exceptionalism' concept

The popular uprisings that stirred the Arab World in 2011 have urged the revision of the existing literature on the lack of democracy in the MENA area which developed around the concept of 'Arab exceptionalism'. The most debated issue concerns, instead, the conditions for MENA countries to be eventually affected by democracy diffusion. Being aware that the short-term changes in MENA political systems cannot progress steadily along pre-determined stages or within a path dependent process, democratization can be interpreted and conceived as a 'long-term Democracy Diffusion Process' (Rossi, 2012)³.

Following the long-term perspective, democracy can be considered at the global level as a *social innovation of political change*⁴. According to George Modelski, democratization is strictly related to the evolution of the global political system and the creation of a *global community* and *world public opinion*. Beyond the evolution of global politics and global economy, there is an evolution of global community and world public opinion. Since the moment when democratization as a social innovation has been introduced, democratic practices have been disseminated on a global scale. This process can be represented by a *learning curve* that shows a growing proportion of the population living in democratic countries (Modelski and Perry 1991). The contemporary phase is called "democratic transition" (*decisive* or *selectional*) and prepares what will be the next phase, building the foundations for a future democratic governance. In the current stage, radical Islamist movements seem to be the forces that try to defy the contemporary global support for democratization⁵ (Modelski 2008). Among the co-evolutionary trends identified by Modelski, *world opinion* – a social construction characterized by strong and active media – is becoming increasingly important in "defining global problems" (Modelski and Thompson 2002; Attinà 2011). The specific role of information and media during the Arab Spring days may be seen as part of such a rise of an *informed world public opinion*, even if it is difficult to assess their specific influence in the development of the uprisings (Rossi, 2012).

The transitions underway in some MENA countries may also be considered as part of a political change of short duration – in other words as "conjunctures of events" (Attinà 2011, cit. in Rossi 2012) – and hence such change should be nested within the above long term evolutionary process.

2. Conceptualizing democracy: the need for overcoming cultural borders

The conceptualization of democracy has traditionally attracted scholarly attention. The inherent difficulty consists of finding a definition which – overcoming any cultural specificity – applies to different regional contexts. The Arab revolts indicate that a common definition of democracy can be shared as long as this implies periodic, free, fair, effective elections for choosing parliamentary and executive institutions; a true multi-party system; together with freedom of assembly, association and speech, also implying the free use of new media⁶.

De facto Arab protesters seem to have agreed upon a shared definition of democracy that is both procedural and participatory, thus based both upon political rights and individual liberties. The procedural definition of democracy drawing from the tradition of Joseph Schumpeter and Robert Dahl is not in contrast with a plural political society that is not necessarily expressed by secular forces or pro-Western civil society. Conversely, the coexistence of various social and political forces (including Islamist parties) can only be the guarantee of a plural liberal democracy. Tolerance and respect of various forces can be guaranteed only through legal institutions. Hence, to ensure a competitive, responsive and participatory democracy, the rule of law is required as a guarantor of democratic institutions (O'Donnell, 2001).

Scholars of democracy are well aware of what democracy is (or is not) and have almost agreed on a distinction between democratic regimes, authoritarian regimes and post-authoritarian regimes, or 'democracies with adjectives', as Collier and Levitsky called them (1997). The 'minimal' conditions of democracy indicated by Dahl (1971) are a valid instrument to identify a threshold that allows distinguishing authoritarianism from democracy. Dahl regards both liberalization (or competition) and participation (or inclusiveness) as fundamental conditions to establish a poliarchy, therefore he identifies the following political institutions as necessary conditions for democracy: elected rulers; free, correct and frequent elections; freedom of expression; access to multiple sources of information; freedom of association; universal suffrage (*ibidem*). All these elements individually taken are necessary, but not sufficient to establish a democratic regime.

A paradigm of political change acknowledging a stop-and-go dynamic, or even reverse trends in the short to medium term, is much more useful to understand the political processes involving the MENA area rather than a deterministic transition paradigm. The current political ambiguity might lead to stable democratic regimes or, conversely, turn into new types of authoritarian regimes. Being democratization such a complex

process, blocked democratic transitions might lead to the instauration of 'hybrid regimes', i.e. regimes characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity (Morlino 2011: 49), instead of democratic regimes.⁷

The delicate relationship between religion and democracy is another crucial issue – traditionally debated in political theory – that has acquired today a new flair. The most common claim of a presumed incompatibility between Islam and democracy recalls Samuel Huntington's argument about a *clash of civilization* (1996). Undoubtedly, in some cases (as Senegal or Mali) coexistence between Islam and democracy is not easy, but in other cases (as Turkey or Indonesia) coexistence was feasible. Democracy and Islam can coexist when institutions as such are guaranteed and are not questioned by a religiously inspired government. The guarantee of democracy relies upon the respect of institutions, as a more important value than religious principles. In this respect, the Turkish case is particularly relevant, being a secular state (by constitution) with a Muslim majority population that is ruled by a Muslim majority party. As an Islamic country that has experienced a democratic transition process, Turkey has successfully achieved a compromise between secular institutions and a religiously inspired government. In Turkey, modernization is not accompanied by secularization of state and society; on the contrary, it is being marked by a renewed Islamic religiosity (Ozzano, 2012). Again, a Schumpeterian concept of procedural democracy seems to prevail in Turkey over a normative definition of democracy based upon the a-religiosity of a secularistic state. Many scholars consider the Turkish experience as a successful 'model' for the MENA countries timidly experiencing political change processes.

3. Popular mobilization in the MENA area: protesters as actors of democratic change

The 2011 popular mobilization represents the highest level of mobilization ever registered in the Arab world. Considering that political participation represents a fundamental democracy condition, studies on social movements are devoting much attention to the popular dimension of the Arab upheavals to grasp any potential of democracy diffusion through a bottom-up strategy. While persistent authoritarian regimes had flourished with the silent responsibility – if not even support – of the Western world, widespread popular uprisings and the high number of casualties occurred in the last eighteen months in the MENA countries indicate that democracy, freedom and justice are regarded as vital values worth fighting for.

The tragic self-burning of Mohamed Bouazizi (a 26 years old unemployed graduate), which took place in the Tunisian inland rural town of Sidi Bouzid on 17 December 2010, determined a sort of 'domino effect', i.e. a contagious popular mobilization favored by new media and nourished by socio-economic dissatisfaction, rising unemployment (particularly youth's and middle class' unemployment), long-lasting authoritarian political control and denial of civil liberties. Starting in Sidi Bouzid, a wave of protests quickly spread all over the MENA area (in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, and to a lesser extent also in Algeria, Morocco, Jordan and Mauritania) conveying both political and socio-economic requests, with freedoms and liberties alongside better employment, all regarded by protesters as goals worth dying for.

The 2011 popular mobilization was strongly different from previous Arab experiences. These uprisings were neither ideological nor religiously inspired and had essentially domestic origins. This was not a protest against the West, nor did external actors instill it. Protesters in Tunisia and Egypt were not raising Islamic claims nor demanding the Shari'a law. In most cases, these popular revolts started as peaceful demonstrations characterized by slogans pleading for freedom and political reforms and were organized independently from Islamic extremists or anti-Western groups. This was not a protest of the poor people; it was rather the revolt of the educated middle class. These spontaneous protests were the result of a contextual situation: they depended on severe political and economic conditions, but were facilitated and acquired such proportion thanks to the new communication tools.

Investigating features and actors of the protest, scholars devoted specific attention to the role of new media among the most important factors favoring the 'domino effect' of the popular mobilization, with protests quickly becoming a transnational phenomenon. New media were used to organize the popular protests by

putting together heterogeneous groups sharing the same (res)sentiment against the political leadership. Internet could easily transmit this common feeling that was widely shared in most MENA countries; it was an effective instrument for mass political mobilization, a better and faster way to leverage widespread popular dissatisfaction. Internet and mobile phones were used as innovative tools to organize demonstrations, coordinate activists and exchange information. On-line activism accompanied and sustained street activism. Thanks to the new technological instruments, popular mobilization acquired an impressive transnational dimension.

Alongside the organizational added value, new media were also extremely useful in increasing the awareness of the Arab public opinion and of the international community in general. Local and international media played an important role in either manipulating information or broadcasting the brutal repression internationally (like in the Syrian case or with the riots taking place in the weeks before the Egyptian elections). Media, in particular satellite televisions such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, became an effective political actor denouncing the repressive action of the authoritarian regimes in the area. Internet became an instrument to denounce police abuse and human rights violations: videos posted on YouTube from mobile phones were essential vehicles to broadcast information in real time, bypassing the institutional regime-controlled media. 'Cybernavts' succeeded in avoiding censorship and posted videos with a high emotional impact, thus increasing at least virtually the opposition's power.

Thus, technology represents a serious challenge for authoritarianism, as it allows to denounce any kind of violations globally, *de facto* spreading democracy as a global process. Free information has then become both a democratic tool and value.

4. The Arab Spring and political change: an actor-centred versus a system explanation?

The Arab Spring has attracted the scholarly attention – of comparative politics in particular – upon the linkage between domestic and international actors. The European experience, of Greece, Spain and Portugal in the 1980s, of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, evidenced a positive sum game between domestic and international dimension. Does a comparison between these different areas show similar trends? So far political change in the MENA has been explained primarily through an actor-centred rather than a system-explanation, seeing domestic actors' involvement as a *condicio sine qua non* of local change.

The Arab Spring has brought to the fore the traditional debate on the determinants of democracy. The literature on the international determinants envisaged diffusion at the global, regional and neighbor state level (Starr, 1991: 356). Undeniably, in the last decades globalization has become an important feature of the global political system, fostering the diffusion of democracy both as a political regime and as a set of principles and values (see § 1 above). However, the different outcomes of political change registered so far in the MENA countries suggest that the primary responsibility for the establishment of a democratic regime relies upon local actors.

The short-term analysis of change in the MENA region has singled out the local political leadership as prevailing over the regional context in determining the outcome of the popular requests for political change. Although the wave of protests has touched almost all MENA countries, only few regimes fell. Namely, Ben Ali and Mubarak were overthrown, and Quadhafi was killed during the civil war, while Bashar Al-Assad is violently reacting against his people, trying to keep his power despite a bloody civil war. Arab monarchies proved to be more stable. In Jordan and Morocco, the ruling dynasties demonstrated to rely upon strong popular support and legitimacy.

Without neglecting the importance of the international arena during the democratic consolidation phase, the Arab experience points to regime change as a mainly domestic political choice. It is only when the Tunisian and Egyptian masses started their violent protests that the old authoritarian regimes were defeated. The

international support can help afterwards, in the phase of instauration and consolidation of a new (democratic) regime. Therefore, a distinction between short- to mid- and long-term political change appears essential to understand possible modes of change. An actor-centered explanation applies in the short to medium term, while a system explanation can apply considering the long cycle of change. This indicates that the transition to democracy must be primarily an endogenous process, ultimately supported by external actors.

Another relevant assumption concerns the key domestic actors of change. In the short term, mass mobilization is a relevant driver of change, with new actors such as bloggers and social networks playing a major role. In the medium to long-term, political leadership and civil society networks have a much bigger responsibility for the establishment of the arenas of democracy as identified by Linz and Stepan (1996). The former have a role to play as *pars destruens* denouncing and defeating the authoritarian regime; the latter are relevant as *pars costruens* for elaborating new norms and institutions. The general public mobilizing against the regime requires elite actors guiding the democratic transition through the setting up of democratic institutions.

Popular mobilization from below can be effective in the short run to overcome the existing regime (as in the case of Egypt), while elites play a key role in establishing the new (democratic) regime in the medium to long term. Popular mobilization can remove authoritarian regimes, but it is not apt to set up new institutions. For democratization to be successful, since it is commonly accepted that no universal model of democracy exists, a procedural democratic model can be envisaged and applied to culturally, socially, ethnically, economically different contexts.

All in all, a persistent long-term feature seems to have emerged. A new political competition replaced the former stability and the supposed political apathy of the citizens living in authoritarian countries. Islamist actors, in particular, proved to possess a relevant political power. Although it is still unsure whether any democratic transition will succeed in the area, the Islamist parties will have an important role to play in these political processes, as they are getting a large electoral support (e.g. in Tunisian, Egyptian and Moroccan elections). Islamists as determinant actors of the transformation of authoritarian regimes might suggest unusual paths to democratic change. And the international community (and the EU) will have to regard non-violent Islamist actors as political interlocutors, particularly if they are democratically elected and represent a large part of the Arab political realm and societies.⁸

If we first of all consider democracy in terms of democratic procedures and respect of the rules of the game, or as Linz and Stepan (1996) claimed there is an agreement on the 'democratic pact', democratic procedures can be present to the same degree among those who favor secular democracy and those who favor a political system that is both democratic and Islamic. The international community should support these political changes without exacerbating cultural or religious differences, by developing political and economic cooperation with the local actors, irrespectively of their political or religious faith. As I said above (§ 2), the Turkish case proves that an Islamist party ruling the country can be compatible with democratic institutions and procedures.

Domestic determinants (protests originated by socio-economic dissatisfaction and authoritarian rule) appeared to be much more effective in the fight against authoritarianism than the external dimension. Diffusion or contagion can take place if a functioning regional institutional network exists and helps to share and consolidate democratic practices, as it was the case with EU enlargement⁹. It is misleading to talk about a 'fourth wave of democratization', since the political change process appears too ambiguous and is based on a case-to-case basis. The 'wave' metaphor suggests a sort of democratic diffusion/democratic effect process. But democratization is not an automatic process. Contrary to what happened in the 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe, when due to a sort of domino effect all communist regimes turned into democratic regimes based on market economy, the Arab countries map shows a leopard spot-like political change.

This does not mean that the MENA area has to remain untouched from the global trend towards

democratization. Simply, international forces and actors can foster the democratization process at a later stage, once local actors (either power elites or opposition movements or both) take the lead for political change. Yet, once transition starts, there is no inevitable move towards democracy consolidation, being the transition paradigm not empirically tested as a global trend. The outcomes of these political processes are uncertain and depend on how actors deal with structural conditions, which are out of their control but can be tackled with different strategies and options. In this sense, democratic transition cannot be – and never is – inevitable. Conversely, democratization is a dynamic process risking to be reversed by de-democratization processes (Tilly, 2007).

5. Preliminary conclusion to foster the discussion

No deterministic vision can be applied to explain recent upheavals in MENA countries. A paradigm of *change* that can identify the possible evolution of these trends is certainly more useful than the transition paradigm (Rossi, 2012). The metaphor of *winds of democratic change* blowing in the MENA indicates the plurality of challenges and perspectives of these trends, and in such way proposes to cover both the potentialities and uncertainties of political change. There is not only *one* wind, as a *unique* and *straightforward* political transition does not exist. A “wind” derives from the struggle between two pressures striving to find a dynamic equilibrium. Similarly, political transformations in MENA countries follow some key “differences in pressure” or “differences of focus” in the move to new potentially dynamic political orders (*ibidem*).

Structural explanations of democratization would suggest a causal mechanism that risks becoming a sort of deterministic process that is far from being real¹⁰. Structural conditions can favor the stabilization of democracy, but rarely can – on their own – allow democratization. The democratization experiences suggest that – since there are various historical, institutional and structural conditions for regime’s change – there are no fixed prerequisites of democratization; the local actors’ will is instead essential for the beginning of the democratization process.

What the Arab uprisings suggest is the need for a combination of pro-democratic social forces and class action, together with active elite actors. Yet, the popular mobilization in the MENA area created volatile, collective identities that collapsed easily without proposing a valid ruling alternative. Social forces such as university students or human rights activists effectively used the new media to organize the protest, but then proved weak to propose a political program. This suggests that collective action can provide indications to rulers but cannot rule. In Tunisia and Egypt, large parts of the population participated in the protests, but were not organized in groups that could express a political project. Spontaneous groups, also created via the Internet, have then left place to more structured actors such as Islamist parties (*Ennahda* in Tunisia and Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt), which confirmed their large popular support with an extraordinary electoral result.

This region-based analysis does not aim to provide a general theory of democratization, but empirical references to test some determinants of democratization identified by the literature. The analysis of the Arab democratic uprisings in 2011 suggests that the actor-centered approach is better suited to explain democratic change than system approaches. Further research and a comparison between regions might further foster the theory of democratization.

Predictions concerning a democratic transition are shortsighted. An important lesson, though, can be drawn from popular revolts in the Arab countries: religious traditions prevailing in most Arab countries do not inhibit the emergence of a democratic culture as an ensemble of attitudes, beliefs and values of the ordinary citizens. Empirical studies have already demonstrated that public opinion is aware of the value of civil liberties and political rights; what has instead been missing in the area is the institutional dimension of democracy (Tessler 2002: 338). The relationship between democracy and Islam has been long debated, arguing in favor or against the compatibility between them. There is not a clear-cut position on that, because the influence of the Muslim religion depends to a very considerable extent on how and by whom it is interpreted (Tessler 2002: 340).

Even though the outcome of stable democratic regimes is far from certain, winds of political change are blowing. Historically, the path to democracy has been variegated. The MENA countries are not an exception.

Notes

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¹ Since the early 2011 both scholars and media have been talking about an 'Arab Spring' to stress the awakening of the Arab world from long-lasting authoritarianism. One year later, facts-based analyses discard the initial optimism and unveil ambiguous realities. I will refer here to 'Arab Spring' being aware of the conceptual weakness of this concept and of the uncertainty of this process.

² In the early 1990s the spread of democracy seemed to be inevitable, particularly with the fall of communism (see, for instance, Fukuyama 1992) and the diffusion of democracy that was promoted in Europe through the EU's enlargement process (Schimmelfennig and Scholz 2008). Yet, this global movement towards democracy left the Arab world untouched, with old authoritarian regimes stably in place until 2011. This phenomenon is at the basis of the 'Arab exceptionalism' concept. Some scholars brought this concept to an extreme and even argued that there is something inherently undemocratic about Islam as a religious doctrine, or the way in which Islamic societies are organized (Huntington, 1996). On the Arab exceptionalism see – among others – Stepan and Robertson (2003; 2004), Diamond (2010).

³ For the differences and relationship between short-term and long-term change perspective of analysis see Attinà (2011: 71-83).

⁴ This reconstruction of democratization as a long-term process draws from Rossi (2012). With Modelski and Thompson's terms (2002: 128, cit. in Rossi 2012): "if democracy is not a Western universalist pretension ... but a potent social innovation, a generally applicable technology for effective cooperation, then its continued future spread might be estimated on the basis of well-established laws of diffusion of innovation".

⁵ However, according to the author it is required that the world system reaches "a condition of overwhelming majority for democracies, accounting for, say, 90 percent of the world population" — which will not be reached before the middle of this century (around year 2075) (Modelski 2012) — to register an influence on the coming macro-decision phase, aiming to reach a systemic democratic peace.

⁶ In this respect the definition of democracy elaborated by Robert Dahl in the 1970s seems still adequate to the needs and demands formulated during the revolts.

⁷ The definition of hybrid regimes provided by Morlino (2011: 56), includes both ambiguity and some sort of stabilization or duration.

⁸ At the recent elections, Islamists performed very well, disappointing those inattentive observers who wrongly believed that the Arab Spring was paving the way for secular democratic rule. Protesters made use of new media and technology to bypass the domestic censorship, but never made reference to Western values or habits.

⁹ The fundamental role of EU institutions in providing a framework for the democratic change of Central and Eastern European countries was played essentially via the enlargement process; this was also experienced in the Turkish reform process (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008).

¹⁰ Seymour Lipset's work (1959) is at the origins of the modernization theory claiming that countries that have undergone a more extensive process of societal modernization are more likely to be democratic.

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