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From Spring to Winter: Democratic Regression and Autocratic Consolidation in Egypt and Tunisia (2011-2024)

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بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, the most Beneficent, the most Merciful

First and foremost, I would like to thank my Lord, who has blessed me with the ability and patience to complete this work. I thank Allah (SWT) for guiding me on His path and granting me the power to finish my education. I ask Allah for this work to be accepted as *sadaqah jariyah* and to serve as a means of beneficial knowledge.

I am incredibly grateful for my supervisor, Steven Forti, for his continuous guidance, patience, and encouragement throughout this academic journey. It has been an honor to be your student and mentee these past three years.

To my beloved and loving husband, I cannot put into words how thankful I am for your unwavering support. Thank you for being my pillar and biggest supporter throughout my academic, professional, and personal journey. It is a privilege to walk this life beside you. May Allah reward you immensely in this life and the next.

Lastly, I especially dedicate this thesis to the people of Palestine. As of the date of this publication, 54,470 Palestinians have been killed in what is a livestreamed genocide. No university remains on its feet in the Gaza Strip, and more than 12,799 students will not be able to graduate this year. May Allah accept your martyrdom and place you in the highest rank of Paradise.

And for the youths of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Syia, Jordan, Iraq, Yemen, and Bahrain, thank you for your constant hope and perseverance to make our countries better.

رَبِّ زِدْنِي عِلْماً

My Lord, increase me in knowledge

ABSTRACT

The Arab Spring initially promised democratic transformation across the Middle East and North Africa, yet today the countries that once exemplified successful change have reverted to autocracy. This thesis examines the factors that led to democratic regression and autocratic consolidation in Egypt and Tunisia. Through a dual methodological approach, a qualitative historical analysis and a subsequent comparative case study, this thesis's findings are threefold: firstly, the interaction between competing ideologies, elite resistance, and fragmented civil society formed a democratic vulnerability triangle; secondly, initial democratic success does not guarantee long-term survival, which is dependent in the aforementioned factors; and third, economic failures were MENA's democracy's Achilles' heel, eroding public legitimacy and creating opportunities for populist authoritarianism. Thus, this paper notes that future transitions must address all three vulnerability elements simultaneously by neutralizing elite resistance, building ideological consensus, and strengthening civil society. Additionally, we observe that the MENA experience challenges linear democratization theory, highlighting that economic delivery is as crucial as institutional design for democratic survival.

Keywords: Arab Spring; democratic transition; autocratic consolidation; democratic regression; democratization

RESUM

La Primavera Àrab va prometre inicialment una transformació democràtica a l'Orient Mitjà i el Nord d'Àfrica, però avui els països que en un moment van exemplificar canvis reeixits han retornat a l'autocràcia. Aquesta tesi analitza els factors que van conduir a la regressió democràtica i la consolidació autocràtica a Egipte i Tunísia. Mitjançant un enfocament metodològic dual, una anàlisi històrica qualitativa i un estudi de cas comparatiu posterior, les conclusions d'aquesta tesi són triples: primer, la interacció entre ideologies competidores, resistència de les elits i una societat civil fragmentada va formar un triangle de vulnerabilitat democràtica; segon, l'èxit democràtic inicial no garanteix la supervivència a llarg termini, que depèn dels factors esmentats; i tercer, els fracassos econòmics van ser el taló d'Aquil·les de la democràcia a la regió MENA, erosionant la legitimitat pública i creant oportunitats per a l'autoritarisme populista. Així doncs, aquest treball

assenyala que les futures transicions han d'abordar simultàniament els tres elements de vulnerabilitat neutralitzant la resistència de les elits, construint consens ideològic i enfortint la societat civil. A més, observem que l'experiència de la regió MENA qüestiona la teoria lineal de democratització, destacant que el compliment econòmic és tan crucial com el disseny institucional per a la supervivència democràtica.

Paraules clau: Primavera Àrab; transició democràtica; consolidació autocràtica; regressió democràtica; democratització

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1. Introduction

The Arab youth's dissatisfaction with governments, continuous human rights violations, political corruption, unemployment, and numerous other factors served as the breeding ground for an uprising. The population had grown weary of their governments, to such an extent that in 2011 revolutions succeeded in overthrowing the governments of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Thirteen years later, new debates have emerged regarding whether the Arab Spring was beneficial, given that the countries that once exemplified successful change have reverted to autocracy.

Thus, this study aims to shed light on the complex dynamics of democracy and autocracy in the Middle East and North Africa, emphasizing why the democratic transition failed rapidly in Egypt while taking a decade in Tunisia, and identifying patterns that could inform understanding of democratization processes in the MENA region. This dissertation serves a dual objective: first, it presents an empirical study of the Arab Spring's consequences through the aforementioned case studies, highlighting ongoing debates and events. Second, it incorporates a critical analysis of democratization and autocracy dynamics, specifically in Egypt and Tunisia and broadly in the MENA region, through an interdisciplinary framework. To comprehend this autocratic consolidation process, the proposed hypothesis in this study is as follows: the failure of democratization in Egypt and Tunisia can be attributed to three key factors: the presence of competing and fragmented ideologies (specifically religious divisions), inconsistent patterns of elite intervention in the democratic process, and the inability of citizen organizations to maintain cohesive political movements.

Despite extensive literature on democratization and the Arab Spring, existing scholarship tends to study the MENA region as homogeneous, missing crucial country-specific dynamics and focusing primarily on why uprisings occurred rather than why democratic transitions failed. This thesis addresses these gaps through a detailed comparative analysis of the abovementioned countries, two cases that presented the most promise for democratic consolidation.

This thesis proceeds as follows: starting with a review of democratization literature and a historical context overview, this framework provides a solid foundation for later examining in detail the Egyptian and Tunisian cases respectively and finally concluding by offering a comparative study and conclusions.

2. Literature review

While traditional democratization theory often assumed a linear progression toward democratic consolidation, recent scholarship has challenged this assumption, particularly in light of democratic regression in the Middle East and North Africa. Ibrahim (2013) observes that a combination of internal factors, such as crises within the non-democratic regime or the strength of civil society, and external factors, such as the role of Western powers or international institutions, contribute to democratization. Nonetheless, it is imperative to note that political liberalization does not necessarily lead to a democratic system and may instead manifest as a hybrid one (Ibid.). Similarly, the author suggests that external actors may support democratic development in countries that have potential for democratization, but democracy cannot be imposed from the outside; rather, it emerges from within and is intricately related to economic, social, and cultural factors.

Building upon these insights, O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) established the foundations for the third-wave democratization theory and differentiated between democratization and liberalization, in which the former aims to expand rights and freedoms while the latter advocates for the principle of citizenship in political institutions. According to the political scientists, the existence of divisions within the centralized government is a precondition for liberalization, and soft-liners within the regime—those who recognize the necessity for political opening and are willing to negotiate with the opposition—become critical for initiating the opening.

Furthermore, they identify a cycle of mobilization, beginning with the resurrection of civil society, followed by a surge in political activity and the subsequent decline as actors adjust to the new political environment. Additionally, the manner and timing of liberalization, degree of repression, and military role are crucial: the trajectory and outcomes of a transitional period are most effective from a position of strength and with the armed forces supporting the civilian government, despite likely occurring during a regime failure and with the military serving as a repressive force (Ibid.).

Within this theoretical framework, the role of elections emerges as particularly significant, but they are not a guarantee for a stable democracy; the rules of the election, party formation, and emerging government type all matter substantially (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Ibrahim 2013). On this last point, hybrid administrations that combine features of democracy and authoritarianism can be enduring (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986).

Samuel Huntington (1996) observes that the third wave of democratization had a rather limited impact on Muslim countries, primarily because Islamist movements were gaining traction at the time. The countries where democratization was established during the 1970s and 1980s had a few commonalities: first, the major underlying factor in these countries was the experience of economic development, alongside the intervention of the United States, major Western European powers, and international institutions, especially in Southern Europe, Latin America, the East Asian periphery, and Central Europe. The author also notes that the emergence of these new democratic regimes was more likely to stabilize in predominantly Catholic and Protestant countries, which is closely linked to Western influence; we see a clear illustration of this in how the Baltic countries, former Soviet Union territories, successfully stabilized democracy while Orthodox republics showed varied results, with Muslim republics being "bleak," as the author states.

Huntington (1996) also notes that following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a conviction in the West that a "global democratic revolution was underway," making the promotion of democracy a high-priority issue in Western foreign policy. An intriguing concept that Huntington discusses is the "paradox of democracy," through which he explains that the adoption of Western democracy can empower nativist and anti-Western political movements, resulting in governments that are not aligned with democratic or Western values. Examples of this include the cancellation of the 1992 election in Algeria by the military and how the Sri Lanka Freedom Party ousted the western-oriented United National Party in 1956, facilitating the ascendance of the nationalist movement in the 1980s.

While these theories provide essential insights into democratic transitions, more recent academic work has focused specifically on the MENA region's particular dynamic. Hill (2016) utilizes Levitsky and Way's model of competitive authoritarianism to explain the political development of the Maghreb in the 2000s. Despite the region's distinct features, the political dynamics can be understood through the model's three core dimensions: linkage, the density of ties between a regime and Western countries; leverage, the capacity of Western countries to influence a regime and its vulnerability to external pressure; and organizational power, a regime's ability to sustain itself, which is based on the strength of its state and party structures, including coercive capacity and control of the economy.

The application of competitive authoritarianism theory to the MENA region has revealed distinctive patterns of authoritarian resilience (King 2009; Topak et al. 2022; Hill 2016), characterized by changes in policies, ruling coalitions, political institutions, and legitimation strategies (Ibid.). Expanding on O'Donnell and Schmitter's (1986) challenging notion that economic liberalization leads to democratization, Hill (2016) argues that economic reforms have been employed to sustain autocratic rule by creating new opportunities for rent-seeking among elites, and alongside single-party institutional structures and patronage-based economic liberalization, has become a key factor in elucidating the persistence of authoritarianism in the Arab republics. Hence, new authoritarian governments have adopted a façade of multiparty politics while maintaining centralized power.

If we examine specifically the Middle East and North Africa, scholars emphasize that authoritarianism in the MENA region has not only persisted but also evolved and adapted in response to both internal and external pressures, mainly the third wave of democracy and the Arab Spring (Topak et al. 2022; King 2009). In this manner, King (2009) argues that authoritarian regimes in countries such as Egypt, Syria, Algeria, and Tunisia have experienced substantial changes, which have led to a "new authoritarianism," characterized by a façade of multiparty politics, increasingly powerful presidents, economic liberalization with patronage, and electoral legitimation strategies (Ibid.). Moreover, Levitsky and Way (2002), cited in Hill (2016), categorize Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania as "competitive authoritarian" due to their organizational powers and inconsistent Western pressure (Ibid.). Returning to King (2009), also citing Levitsky and Way (2002) when describing regimes with democratic institutions and meaningful elections that incumbents manipulate to remain in power.

Authoritarian regimes in the MENA region have "upgraded and intensified their use of authoritarian practices" (Topak et al. 2022) as a means to counter social uprisings and technological advancements, transitioning from traditional methods like physical violence and surveillance, although these remain very prevalent, to micro-practices of repression such as digital surveillance, mobilization of troll armies, and the dissemination of misinformation. At the same time, more established authoritarian practices like press censorship, torture, and arbitrary arrests have intensified (Ibid.).

These regimes have also moved toward “legalizing authoritarianism,” concealing it behind the premise of counterterrorism. This is clearly evident in the 2014 counter-terror law of Saudi Arabia, which includes provisions against disrupting public order, harming the security and stability of the community, risking national unity, and harming the reputation or status of the country. Other examples include Egypt's 2013 Protest Law and Turkey's 2015 Internal Security Package, as well as Turkey's and Egypt's repressive internet laws (Ibid.).

Topak et al. (2022) have expressed a differing perspective on MENA's exceptionalism, highlighting that repressive practices in the region are not unique but part of global trends. They present “everyday authoritarianism” to study the micro-dynamics of power, supported by Foucault's call to study power in its micro-physical forms, which include specific actions and techniques to suppress dissension. They emphasize that authoritarian processes are not limited to autocratic regimes and are present in pluralistic ones as well, given that they often outlive authoritarian regimes themselves, continuing even in post-conflict or transition situations.

This framework employs a bottom-up approach, focusing on the application and development of authoritarian tactics before, during, and after episodes of social protest. The concept of “repertoire of repression” is used to demonstrate how authorities employ a routinized set of strategies to control dissent, including the disqualification of mobilized groups, the search for scapegoats, and the designation of external enemies. The authors conclude that MENA is not unique in this trend; rather, we are experiencing a “resurgence of authoritarian practices globally,” even in some liberal democratic states, making the Arab and North African countries fit into this wave of autocratization and “fitting in” with the rest, a notable shift, as they were the outliers during the previous wave of democratization.

Despite the growing literature on democratization and autocratic consolidation in the MENA region, several critical gaps persist. First, there is a notable scarcity of Arabic academic work examining this phenomenon, limiting our understanding from local perspectives. Second, existing literature has overwhelmingly focused on macro-level mechanisms of repressive methods, while insufficient attention has been paid to the micro-dynamics of power and the sociological foundations of new totalitarian forms. Third, many researchers continue to operate under the assumption that autocratic regimes will inevitably transition to democracies, neglecting the study of enduring competitive authoritarian systems. Finally, the tendency to treat MENA as a

homogeneous region has resulted in limited country-specific comparative analyses, particularly regarding why some countries democratize while others remain authoritarian despite apparent similarities.

2.1.1. Conceptual framework

Democracy is defined differently by various scholars. Levitsky and Way (2002), cited by Hill, implicitly define democracy in contrast to authoritarianism, describing the latter as "the absence of viable legal channels for opposition to contest for executive power," thereby positioning democracy as a system where these channels exist and are meaningful. They distinguish between closed and hegemonic authoritarian regimes, with the latter maintaining formal democratic institutions as a façade through repression, candidate restrictions, and fraud, resulting in elections with predetermined outcomes. They also characterize democracy by its emphasis on creating and maintaining a level playing field for political competition.

Przeworski's (2019) minimalist definition, as cited in Forti (2024), describes democracy as "a political agreement in which the people decide who will govern them through elections and have a reasonable chance of removing incumbents they do not like" or simply "a system in which parties that lose elections leave office."

For this thesis, we will base our understanding of democracy and autocracy on the V-Dem Institute's definitions: "a political regime in which the power to govern (both legislative and executive) is assigned by means of periodic, inclusive and multiparty elections that are conducted in conditions of freedom and fairness" (Cassani 2019).

Autocracy, similarly, is presented in various definitions. Barakat (1993) defines despotism, istibdad, as "autocratic rule according to the ruler's own whims and inclinations." Levitsky and Way (2002) focus on "the absence of viable channels for opposition to contest legally for executive power," including closed regimes without national-level democratic institutions and hegemonic regimes with democratic façades maintained through repression and fraud.

For this research, we will adopt the V-Dem Institute's typology of autocracies: closed and electoral.

In closed autocracies, the "executive is not subject to electoral competition" and "can be further classified in hereditary, military and one-party regimes."

Electoral autocracies, however, posit that "both the executive and the legislative offices are filled by means of periodic elections in which opposition is allowed, multiple parties are legal, and more than one candidate is allowed on the ballot."

Democratic regression refers to a process by which a country moves away from democratic governance (King 2009), in contrast to democratic transition and consolidation. Therefore, it can be seen as a form of transition, indicating a reversal of democratization. Democratic backsliding is used as a synonym, described as encompassing sentiments like authoritarian nostalgia, where citizens idealize past authoritarian rule, leading to a contrast between a disappointing present and a romanticized autocratic past (Topak et al. 2022).

This phenomenon can occur not only through coups but also through the abuse of legal loopholes, misuse of constitutional provisions, selective application of legislation, or lawfare by duly elected governments (Forti 2024). This "tragic paradox of the electoral path to authoritarianism" involves the gradual and subtle erosion of democracy using democratic institutions themselves (Ibid.).

Autocratic consolidation necessitates the implementation of various state strategies to protect and reinforce non-democratic rule (Maryon 2024). In the MENA context, it also involves leveraging single-party organizational resources and patronage-based economic liberalization, including creating and favoring a rent-seeking urban and rural elite through the privatization of state assets (King, 2009). The process of autocratic consolidation is characterized by actions taken to disrupt the formation of coalitions that threaten incumbents' hold on power (Ibid.). Autocratic consolidation is also achieved through the continuous application and development of authoritarian practices (Topak et al. 2022). Lastly, autocratic consolidation involves the reconstruction of authoritarianism through institutional and legal channels, not just through repression.

2.1.2. Analytical framework

This thesis employs a three-factor analytical model to examine democratic regression and autocratic consolidation in Egypt and Tunisia, focusing on:

Competing ideologies. There is an analysis on how the fragmentation of ideological landscape, focusing on tensions between Arab socialism, religious fundamentalism, and neoliberalism, created conditions for democratic breakdown.

Elite intervention patterns. Building on work by O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986), we will examine how different elite groups (military, economic, political, and religious) intervened in the democratic process. The thesis analyzes when, how, and why these elites chose to support or undermine democratic institutions, with particular attention to military elites whose actions proved decisive in both cases.

Civil society cohesion. The final analytical factor examines how civil society's ability, or lack thereof, to maintain cohesive political pressure influenced democratic outcomes. This study explores how divisions within civil society, along ideological, religious, and class lines, affected the resilience of democratic movements against authoritarian pressures.

3. The Arab Spring: Regional Overview

3.1. Catalyst and initial developments

"Blame the time [we live in] and not me." Mohamed Bouazizi's final Facebook post proved prophetic when his self-immolation on December 17th, 2010 sparked the Arab Spring (Farha 2015). After years of police harassment under Tunisia's authoritarian system, Bouazizi's desperate act became a symbol of collective suffering (Aly and Alfonso 2011) and within six months, over a hundred Tunisians from marginalized rural areas followed his example, transforming an isolated incident into a national movement (Ibid.).

While rebellions had been occurring in the Arab world dating since the 1800s, the 2011 revolts marked a fundamental shift from anti-colonial resistance to confronting Arab states themselves. To understand this unprecedented movement, scholars have proposed several explanatory frameworks.

A prominent strand emphasizes popular grievances, particularly unemployment and police violence (L. Anderson 2011; Goldstone 2011), viewing the uprisings as a long-overdue culmination of "pent-up frustrations" (Farha 2015, p. 47). Similarly, Farha (2015), Grinin and Kortayev (2022) and Tran (2024) center their analytical framework on economic triggers, highlighting price increases in essential commodities, mass poverty, economic stagnation, and inequality among a highly educated yet unemployed generation.

These grievances emerged within a broader neoliberal context that had fundamentally altered the social contract in many Arab states. Since the 1980s, economic austerity measures had gradually eroded the "authoritarian bargain" where states provided social services and employment opportunities in exchange for political compliance (Meijer 2016), leaving regimes vulnerable to popular discontent.

Beyond economic factors, political conditions created fertile ground for upheaval. Literature consistently identifies the absence of political freedom, democracy, and accountability as common catalysts (Farha 2015; Tran 2024; Aouragh and Alexander 2011 in Tran 2024; Grinin and Kortayev 2022). Furthermore, the role of security institutions proved equally decisive in determining the outcomes, as the variation in their conduct during moments of authoritarian crisis (Wolf 2024) and the reliability of security forces became crucial variables distinguishing successful revolts from

failed ones (Nepstad 2013). However, it is argued that loyalty or defection is largely determined by two considerations: whether troops received substantial financial or political benefits from the existing regime, and their assessment of the regime's capacity to survive the crisis (Ibid.).

As traditional political channels remained blocked, technology emerged as an alternative avenue for mobilization. Social media became a transformative force, reshaping how movements organized and spread across borders (Aly and Alfonso 2021; Grinin and Kortayev 2022), enabling activists to share tactical experiences, and facilitating an unprecedented coordination across the region (Grinin and Kortayev 2022). Nonetheless, these ICT tools became active instruments only after a political trigger had emerged, amplifying rather than initiating social unrest (Tran 2024).

The interplay of these primary factors was further complicated by regional dynamics, including ethnoreligious and tribal divisions (Grinin and Kortayev 2022), the globalization of ideas regarding acceptable governance practices (Ibid.), international alliances and potential sanctions (Nepstad 2013), and what Grinin and Korayev (2022) term the "Islamist factor" as an emerging element in regional political dynamics.

Understanding these causal factors alone cannot capture the speed and scope with which revolution spread across the Arab world, as Szajkowski's (2011) chronology reveals:

Following intensifying protests in Tunisia, President Ben Ali fled on January 14th, 2011, marking the first successful overthrow of an Arab leader and setting a regional precedent. This breakthrough catalyzed uprisings across the region. Egypt's protests began January 25th, with security forces deploying tear gas and rubber bullets against demonstrators. President Mubarak imposed military curfews but ultimately resigned on February 11th, confirming the Arab Spring as a region-wide phenomenon.

The wave rapidly expanded: Bahrain witnessed violent crackdowns at Pearl Roundabout (February 15th); Libya's "Day of Rage" (February 17th) escalated into armed conflict; and Syria's protests (March 15th) evolved into civil war. Regional power dynamics became evident when Saudi Arabia and the UAE deployed troops to suppress Bahrain's uprising, demonstrating monarchical solidarity against democratic movements.

As regional powers moved to contain the movement, global actors entered the fray: International intervention materialized on March 18th when UN Security Council Resolution 1973 authorized

civilian protection measures in Libya, including a no-fly zone. Coalition airstrikes against Gaddafi's forces transformed popular uprisings into internationalized conflicts. These events established enduring patterns of international intervention, authoritarian resistance, and momentum that would define the Arab Spring's trajectory.

3.2.Key actors and movements

3.2.1. Youth and labor movements

The main constituency of the Arab Spring, made up of the youth movements, was described by early scholars as not being capable of independent action as agency and reduced to a "statistical and economically-deterministic lens" (C. W. Anderson 2013, p. 150) and only seen as a demographic bulge (Ibid., p. 151). Conversely, the Arab Spring has also been described as a youth rebellion (Hoffman and Jamal 2012; Korany and El-Mahdi 2012), whose work was crucial in initiating and sustaining the uprisings across the region (Ardiç 2012).

Young Arabs were also an educated population, with university level education and liberal ideology being directly linked to protests (Hoffman and Jamal 2012), as well as being less religious and more believing in the separation of religion and social and political life (Robbins and Tessler 2011). Armed with both education and technological literacy, young activists revolutionized protest tactics, introducing the internet, social media, and SMS as innovative tools to organize, spread information, coordinate actions, document repression, and create alternative horizontally organized political spaces outside of existing parties (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012; C. W. Anderson 2013) with occupying public squares as a key tactic (C. W. Anderson 2013; Ardiç 2012).

Hence, despite early debates, young people have been seen as a vanguard actors, part of a broader convergence of groups, drawing participants from distinct social strata, and allowing lower-class Arabs to join as well due to economic issues (Grinin and Kortayev 2022).

Joining the students and driven by the slogan "bread, freedom, and social justice", the labor movement protested against their dissatisfaction over economic conditions, social injustice, and lack of dignity (Ardiç 2012) and complemented the students' sit-ins with strikes and protests (Meijer 2016). However, it is worth noting that the workers' unions were greatly controlled by the regimes; hence, demonstrations that brought down autocratic governments occurred outside of

official unions (Ibid.). Nevertheless, labor movements faced challenges in the post-uprising period, failing at building strong, independent unions and overcome the legacy of state control (Ibid.).

3.2.2. Islamic groups

Contrary to the aforementioned groups, the role of Islamists and religious groups was multifaceted, evolving from initial marginal involvement to significant political control after the initial trigger.

Notwithstanding, this political ascendance was not immediate. During the initial phase of the Arab Spring, the movements appeared to be largely secular in nature (AlSayyad and Massoumi 2012) with Salafists even denouncing the call for protests, (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012). Despite their limited participation in street protests, religious groups influenced the Arab Spring from an ideological and motivational perspective (Ardiç 2012). Moreover, Islamic opposition movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), operated through mosques and charities, providing goods, services, and jobs, gaining more weight as state services withdrew (Ibid.).

This institutional foundation and social credibility became significant with electoral gains once democratic processes began (Hill 2016; AlSayyad and Massoumi 2012). Tunisia's Ennahda and Morocco's Justice and Development Party won parliamentary elections in 2011 (Hill 2016), Egypt's MB won the largest bloc in the country's parliament after Mubarak's resignation (AlSayyad and Massoumi 2012) and Algeria's Green Alliance performed well in its 2012 elections (Hill 2016).

3.2.3. Military

Historically, the military has been a central political actor in Arab countries, both indirectly by operating behind the scenes, or directly by seizing power through coups. This pre-existing political role and significant economic interests secured through that political clout influenced their decisions during the uprisings (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012; Kaboub 2013; Nepstad 2013).

In several instances, these interests led militaries to actively defend existing regimes (Hill 2016; Topak, Mekouar and Cavatorta 2022). For instance, in Algeria and Bahrain, the military remained loyal to the state (Nepstad 2013; Hill 2016), and in the former the military was central to the regime's survival by defending government buildings, policing and containing protesters, and preventing the demonstrations from escalating (Hill 2016). Defections were noticed in Syria, although security forces largely supported the regime's resistance.

Other militaries adopted more restrained approaches while still supporting their regimes, as seen in Jordan and Morocco, using "soft security" methods but also passing laws that could be used against dissidents (Topak, Mekouar and Cavatorta 2022, p. 156) and, in the latter, the security apparatus demonstrated cohesion in containing protests, contributing to the regime avoiding revolutionary upheaval (Hill 2016).

In other contexts, military calculations led to the opposite outcome (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012; Nepstad 2013). In Tunisia, the military refused to fire on protesters; their historical marginalization from politics and professional functioning are attributed to be the reason for this defection (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012). In Egypt, the military's abandonment of Hosni Mubarak was due to popular pressure, the military elite's resentment towards Gamal Mubarak's potential succession, and their desire to protect their institutional and economic interests (Ibid.). In Libya and Yemen, large-scale defections from the army contributed to the weakening and eventual collapse of the regimes (Nepstad 2013; Ardiç 2012).

Thus, the military was not a monolithic entity acting in a single way across the region and its behavior, whether active or passive, loyal or defecting, functioned as a critical factor that significantly affected the direction and outcome of the uprisings in different contexts (Ardıç 2012).

4. Historical Context of MENA Region

4.1. Pre-2011 political landscape

Following Ottoman collapse and European colonial withdrawal, the MENA region developed distinct forms of authoritarian rule that emerged and evolved throughout the 20th and 21st centuries (Hourani 1991).

Post-independence political development in Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, and Syria followed a distinct trajectory: first established as single-party states with personalized, monopolistic leadership (Sharabi 1962), then joining Iraq form a "core revolutionary group" promoting Arab nationalism and socialism by the early 1960s (Ibid.), these regimes exhibited classic populist authoritarian characteristics: statist economies, lower-class support bases, and legitimacy rooted in nationalism and socioeconomic promises (King 2009). Their subsequent evolution into "new authoritarianism" retained authoritarian control beneath a multiparty politics façade, with increasing presidential power, economic liberalization, and a ruling coalition anchored by rent-seeking urban and rural economic elites (Ibid.). In contrast, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Jordan, and Morocco constituted another type of regime, characterized as antirevolutionary and antisocialist by the early 1960s (Sharabi 1966).

Across both regime types, military intervention became a defining characteristic of political development. Military coups were a common feature of postcolonial Syria and, to a similar extent, Iraq (Kadri 2016). In Libya, army officers and radical intellectuals overthrew the monarchy in 1969 (Hourani 1991), and in Egypt, the military has held power since the 1952 coup (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012).

Despite this authoritarian dominance, some regimes attempted limited political liberalization. Anwar Sadat initiated political and economic reforms as part of a shift in foreign policy towards alliance with the USA (Darwisheh 2019); in Tunisia, Ben Ali's regime, following Bourguiba's, introduced multiparty legislative elections in 1989 (King 2009), and in Algeria, the military and Chadli Bendjedid took steps in the late 1980s to end the National Liberation Front's political dominance and hold more competitive multiparty elections (Ibid.).

These constrained openings created spaces for opposition movements to emerge and operate in these countries, often with limited political spaces, with Islamist movements being a significant force.

4.2.Socioeconomic conditions

Arab socialist republics initially pursued state-led development through nationalization of industries and financial institutions, and provision of social welfare (King 2009). However, economic strains, rising influence of international financial institutions, stagnant growth, and mounting debt led many to adopt the Washington Consensus model in the 1970s and 1980s, embracing fiscal discipline, privatization, and financial liberalization (Ibid.).

This shift manifested differently across the region: in Egypt, Sadat's *infitah* (economic opening) translated into incentives for domestic and foreign private investment and eliminating controls on worker emigration, with the most significant reforms observed in the early 1990s (Ibid.). For Tunisia, its economic reform was noteable as it turned to the IMF and World Bank for financial aid in the late 1980s (Khalil 2015); Arab governments were often compelled by the need to secure aid and favor from the West to transform from "social states" to "regulatory states," prioritizing fiscal austerity over employment generation and inclusive growth (Ibid.). Central to these transformations was privatization, which represented the most important reforms implemented by the Egyptian and Tunisian governments (King 2009), where the former made use of these policies to shape a new authoritarian ruling coalition among a rent-seeking urban and rural economic elite, with land tenure rights being returned to landlords (Ibid.).

Rather than delivering promised benefits, these reforms produced significant negative consequences. The impact that economic liberalization and privatization had in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and postwar Lebanon aggravated rather than attenuated social tensions and public debt (Farha 2015). While theoretically privatization should decrease rent-seeking and corruption, the results in the abovementioned countries suggest the opposite, widespread crony capitalism instead of market competition (Kaboub 2013; Khalil 2015; King 2009). Perhaps more critically, unemployment became a persistent challenge; despite significant improvements in education levels across the MENA region, job creation and GDP growth have often failed to keep pace with the number of graduates (Farha 2015), a "particularly explosive formula for discontent" (Ibid., p. 57). The excessive focus on the democratization process after the uprisings sis seen by Kaboub

(2013) as having overshadowed very important institutional reforms needed to tackle the root causes of unemployment.

Alongside unemployment, poverty and inequality intensified under these economic policies and were exacerbated by economic crises and rising prices. The 2008 crisis caused a region-wide 32% rise in food prices in 2010 (Ardıç 2012). Despite the reports of economic growth in Egypt and Tunisia in the period before the uprisings, these gains did not translate into a reduction of inequality (Ibid.).

Compounding these problems was the systematic erosion of social protections: historically, the subsidy system in countries like Egypt was a key part of the social contract under Nasser (King 2009; Khalil 2015). However, Sadat cut subsidies on some consumer products and fuel in 1977 (King 2009; Farha 2015), and Mubarak reduced subsidies benefiting workers and peasants (King 2009). Ultimately, the dismantling of the social contract through neoliberal restructuring left populations vulnerable to increased unemployment, rising commodity prices, and stagnant wages (Khalil 2015).

4.3. Regional power dynamics

Internal fragmentation, historical legacies, external powers, and competing ideologies collectively shape the Arab world's regional power dynamics. A significant aspect of this is the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with a potent geopolitical dimension, particularly in the Persian Gulf, following the fall of the Shah in 1979 and the initial fervor of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the 1980s (Mühlberger and Alaranta 2020). Iran began being seen as an internal and external threat by the Gulf states due to its spreading of its revolutionary message, even though Iranian foreign policies moderated after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 (Ibid.). This rivalry intensified and took on a sectarian dimension following regional upheavals (Ibid.). The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime "dramatically affected the regional balance of power" and marked a "turning point…in sectarian relations across the region" (Hashemi and Postel 2017, p. 10 in Mühlberger and Alaranta 2020). Saudi policy became more Islamized in response to internal protests in 1979, asserting its religious credentials and projecting itself as the leader of Sunni Islam, mirroring Iran's efforts among Shia Muslims (Mühlberger and Alaranta 2020). This sectarian lens became a primary way for many in the Arab Gulf states to interpret regional developments after 2003 (Ibid.). Consequently, the vague concept of a "Shia crescent", supposedly running from Iran through Iraq,

the oil-rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon, gained considerable traction in discourse in Middle Eastern discourse. Ruling elites in states like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, with significant Shia communities, viewed the potential spillover of sectarian violence and perceived a threat to internal security. Their distrust of Shia-led governments in Baghdad, suspected of being Iranian proxies, contributed to their reluctance to engage with Iraq, allowing Iran to take the lead in reconstruction projects (Ibid.).

External influences have fundamentally shaped Arab political development, with political fragmentation being influenced by the interplay of internal and external forces (Barakat 1993). Overwhelmingly, Arab regimes have relied more on imperialist backing than their own strenght via the state, leading to political stability depending more on repression than welfare or liberties (Kadri 2016). This pattern has intensified since 2011, with both global and regional powers involved in conflicts in the MENA region, supporting their preferred sides with warfare and surveillance tools, including involvement in conflicts like Yemen and Libya (Topak, Mekouar and Cavatorta 2022), employing former Western military and intelligence officers in Bahrain and the UAE, acquiring monitoring and hacking tools from Western and Israeli companies, etc. (Ibid.). Meanwhile, new external actors are also emerging. China is evolving as a new extra-regional power in MENA, offering a narrative of "peace with development", and advocating for economic development while the US is limited to democracy promotion for stability (Mühlberger and Alaranta 2020).

Internally, the rise of the nation-state and nationalism in the Arab world has pitted Arab against Arab. The history of Arab post-independence has largely been one of splits between different factions. Rival schemes for Arab unity have tended to exacerbate political conflict and undermine loyalties in separate states (Sadiki 2004). This fragmentation reflects deeper structural challenges: Arab politics is driven by communal relations and loyalties, whether be tribal, ethnic, or sectarian, leading to a mosaic structure and political fragmentation that hinders state formation; the challenge for the state is to assert itself against these strong communal loyalties (Barakat 1993). Ruling classes have promoted political fragmentation to perpetuate their power, which is seen as a direct result of the dismemberment of Arab society into several artificial states that served foreign interests (Ibid.). However, the 2011 uprisings may signal a shift in these dynamics, raising questions about the emergence of a new type of pan-Arabism (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012). While

distinct from traditional state-based pan-Arabism associated with entities like the Arab League, Nasserism, and Ba'thism, the regional spillover of these movements raises questions about the characteristics and foundations of this potential new pan-Arabism based on “politics from below”. Nonetheless, “Arab exceptionalism” (the idea that the region is resistant to political change) seems to be ending (Ibid.).

4.4.Colonial legacy and state formation

The colonial legacy and state formation in the Arab world reveal several key patterns:

Most fundamentally, European colonialism reshaped the entire political landscape, shaping the structure of contemporary Arab secular nation-states (Sharabi 1966). The collapse of the Ottoman Empire led to a disorientation in the Arab world, as the European nation-state model was imported and imposed, often without considering existing social structures (Khalil 2015), a vision further solidified by the dissolution of the caliphate by Kemal Atatürk (Ibid.). In response to this colonial imposition, Syria and Iraq began moving towards Arab nationalism, aiming to gain independence from European powers, who reinforced communal, linguistic, and regional separatisms (Sharabi 1966). The state structures that emerged were often “colonially engineered” rather than arising from pre-capitalist historical origins (Ibid., p. 161), thus consequently segmenting and fragmenting Arab society through the influx of Western ideologies (Sadiki 2004).

These colonial legacies also shaped the nature of post-independence regimes. Egypt, along with Algeria, Syria, and Tunisia, became populist authoritarian regimes characterized by statist, interventionist, and redistributive economic policies, primary support from the lower classes, socialist ideologies, and nationalist or charismatic legitimacy based on promises to improve living standards (King 2009). Political power was institutionalized through state parties, affiliated corporatist organizations, and powerful executives (Ibid.). Welfare initiatives, such as land reform and free mass education and healthcare, were used to harness loyalties towards the center (Sadiki 2004). Although Nasser's Arab socialism seemed to owe more to Proudhon and British socialism than to Marx, the regimes in Egypt and Algeria successfully incorporated the military into the system of government (Sharabi 1966). Central to these regimes was the role of the military. During the Arab socialist phase, the class of military officers, alongside the intermediate stratum, assumed

the role of the agent of development and constituted the “state bourgeoisie class” (Kadri 2016). The rise of the military to power involved their transformation into a segment of the ruling class (Ibid.).

Nevertheless, the method of military involvement differed; in Egypt and Algeria, the army was incorporated into the system of government, while in Syria and Iraq, military control was exercised more directly (Sharabi, Nationalism and Revolution in the Arab World 1966). The maintenance of power, which was facilitated by the military's role, is seen as having retarded economic development and the systematic application of socialist reform principles (Ibid.). In contemporary times, military leadership, such as in Egypt, has been noted for declaring certain social topics like demographic development as security issues, illustrating a tendency towards securitization (Mühlberger and Alaranta 2020). The military officer corps is also identified as part of the new ruling coalition in transformed authoritarian rule, alongside economic elites and state officials (King 2009).

Efforts to forge a unified collective identity in the postcolonial state, often under the banner of religious nationalism, unitary *ummaic* identity, or secular nationalism, frequently involved superimposing this identity over existing or marginalized religious, gender-based, tribal, and ethnic identities, resulting in contested and fluid conceptions of “Arab,” “Muslim,” and even “democratic” (Sadiki 2004). Hybridity is noted as increasingly present in the discourses of Islam and democracy. The search for Arab democracy is viewed as rooted in social struggles and contests over the meaning of democracy. Islamists, while engaging in the struggle for democracy, often propose a version that challenges Western foundations like individualism and secularism, asserting that there is no route to democracy without Islam (Ibid.).

5. Case Study: Egypt

5.1. Pre-2011: Mubarak's Regime

Egypt under Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011) was ruled by an authoritarian dominant-party regime (Darwisheh 2019). Mubarak presided over the development, or reemergence, of a façade of multiparty politics, maintaining the continued domination of the state party, the National Democratic Party (NDP) (King 2009; Aziz 2017). The NDP held authority across all branches of government and controlled a vast patronage network and the electronic and print media (King 2009). This façade served multiple control functions: multiparty elections operated as a vehicle for distributing resources to Mubarak's key civilian elites and enhanced the stability of authoritarian rule (Darwisheh 2019). While opposition parties were permitted to contest elections, Mubarak maintained tight control over the electoral process through various legal and extralegal obstacles, such as rigging elections, relying on NDP agents to secure a parliamentary majority, and using heavy-handed security forces to intimidate the opposition and deter voters (Ibid.). The Political Parties Affairs Committee (PPAC), largely composed of NDP partisans, acted as a gatekeeper to safeguard the NDP's hegemony, often denying registration to new parties based on pretextual technicalities (Aziz 2017). Political parties based on religion were categorically rejected, a rule specifically intended to exclude the MB from party politics (Ibid.).

These electoral controls were reinforced by legal mechanisms: parliamentary election laws were amended multiple times during Mubarak's three decades in power (Ibid.) and the country remained under a continued state of emergency (King 2009). Mubarak's parliament routinely extended the state of emergency every three years, enabling a parallel legal system without institutional oversight (Bentivoglio and Brown 2014).

The regime also sought to hide unpleasant realities and suppress information, particularly accusations of corruption, by restricting media (King 2009). Law 93 of 1995 significantly widened the definition of crimes such as the propagation of false information and imposed harsher punishments, aiming to make it easier for the regime to suppress information (Ibid.). Simultaneously, Mubarak shifted Egypt's economic structure and ruling coalition, marking the full transformation to the new authoritarianism (King 2009). State-led economic liberalization was the most important economic reform implemented by the government, resulting in crony capitalism (Ibid.).

This represented a decisive break with the past: the adjustment in economic policy signaled a move away from the multiclass ruling coalition and populist legitimacy that the regime had maintained in the mid-1980s through extensive state sector employment, welfare policies, and land reforms (Ibid.). A cabinet reshuffle in 2004 brought in a group of ministers committed to implementing more rapid and unpopular economic reforms, with ministers linked to a new market-oriented generation led by Gamal Mubarak (Ibid.).

Despite these control mechanisms, the MB emerged as the main opposition social force and the only real threat to single-party rule in Mubarak's Egypt (King, 2009). Following their success in the 2005 elections, the Mubarak regime intensified measures to remove them from the formal political system (King 2009; Aziz 2017). Similarly, other forms of resistance developed; workers expressed their discontent outside the electoral arena, largely through strikes and struggles against the regime-controlled leadership of the national trade union federation (King 2009). The period prior to the 2011 uprising saw an unprecedented frequency and scope of labor protests (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012). Additionally, pro-democracy groups were also part of the opposition landscape (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012). The Kifaya (enough) movement surfaced, leading the first public rally calling for Mubarak to step down and protesting what they viewed as cosmetic changes when constitutional and economic reforms were needed (King 2009; Hassan 2011).

These movements pioneered new forms of resistance, employing tactics such as sit-ins, petitions, and marches (Meijer 2016). The weakness of these broader movements lay in their organizational form; while their non-hierarchical, loose structure was a strength in avoiding repression under the regime, it became a weakness after the regime's fall (Ibid.). Mubarak's regime lacked sophistication in controlling online dissent and mobilization, as demonstrated by its inability to target specific individuals and groups during the 2011 uprising, leading to a costly nationwide internet shutdown (Topak, Mekouar and Cavatorta 2022).

5.2. The Revolution and Democratic Transition (2011-2013)

The period from January 2011 to mid-2013 in Egypt marked a tumultuous phase of revolution and attempted democratic transition following the ouster of Hosni Mubarak. Inspired by events in Tunisia (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012), youth activists were the first to call for popular protests on January 25, 2011, which was named the “day of rage” (Mühlberger and Alaranta 2020). The uprising was directed against the abuses of power perpetrated by Mubarak, the National

Democratic Party (NDP) and particularly the police (Darwisheh 2019; Topak, Mekouar and Cavatorta 2022). The protests quickly ballooned into massive unrest (Mühlberger and Alaranta 2020). Tens of thousands, and eventually millions, gathered in public spaces, most notably Tahrir Square in Cairo (Nepstad 2013; Ardıç 2012). While there were violent clashes between protesters and the regime's security forces (Mühlberger and Alaranta 2020), the military ultimately sided with the movement (Nepstad 2013), defending civil resisters from aggressive police and paramilitary groups and openly refusing to shoot at protesters (Ibid.). The decisive factor came when economic disruption joined political protest; workers and professionals organized strikes in their workplaces (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012) and greatly heightened the pressure on the regime (Ibid.).

Notwithstanding, Mubarak's departure did not lead to genuine democratic transition. Following his downfall, power was transferred to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) (Hourani 1991), Egypt's highest military body composed of top generals (Darwisheh 2019). Rather than facilitating democratization, the SCAF moved to control the process (Ibid.). To preserve its interests and position, the military acted as a veto player that could limit transitional justice, sustain impunity, and control the drafting of a new constitution (Ibid.). The short transitional period was set for six months and later extended to eighteen months, excluded the revolutionary forces from shaping the country's transition. The scope of post-Mubarak competitive politics was narrowed to Parliament and the Presidency, and there was no challenge to the substantive power of the old regime embedded in the military, bureaucracy, judiciary, and police. This effectively fragmented the social forces that drove the 2011 uprising (Darwisheh 2019). Nevertheless, the SCAF allowed elections to proceed, endorsing free and fair electoral competition to enhance its political role as the guardian of a popular mandate. In the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections, Islamist parties, including the MB and Salafists, secured over 70% of the seats (Darwisheh 2019).

The military's control became evident when electoral results threatened its interests. The Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) played a crucial role in undermining the elected bodies. In June 2012, just before the second round of presidential elections, the SCC ruled the 2011-2012 Parliament unconstitutional (Darwisheh, 2019; Aziz 2017). Based on this ruling, the SCAF immediately dissolved Parliament by decree, returning legislative powers to the SCAF until new elections (Darwisheh 2019). Despite this setback, Mohamed Morsi of the MB's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) narrowly won the presidential election against Ahmed Shafik, a former Mubarak loyalist

(Topak, Mekouar and Cavatorta 2022; Aziz 2017). However, his presidency was marked by increasing political polarization (Darwisheh 2019).

From the beginning, Morsi's presidency faced systematic opposition from state institutions. After his victory, the "deep state," comprised of security, military, and judicial institutions that benefited from the Mubarak era (Darwisheh 2019), began mobilizing Egyptians to oust the MB (Ibid.). Public disenchantment grew due to a worsening economy and stagnating tourism revenue (Aziz 2017), alongside a vast social divide between Islamists and secularists, particularly concerning the role of Islam and democracy in society (Kaboub 2013). Faced with institutional constraints, Morsi's response was counterproductive, resorting to ruling by presidential decree (Aziz 2017). In August and November 2012, Morsi issued declarations granting himself broad legislative and executive powers and attempted to purge the military top brass (Mühlberger and Alaranta 2020). This move to centralize power in his office backfired, upsetting non-Islamist forces and antagonizing the military, thus providing a pretext for a subsequent coup (Darwisheh 2019). In the final phase of the opposition, the Tamarod (Rebellion) campaign was launched in April 2013, demanding an end to Morsi's term (Darwisheh 2019). While framed as a youth-led movement, it was funded by billionaire businessmen and Mubarak cronies like Naguib Sawiris and organized by the Interior Ministry and security services (Aziz 2017; Darwisheh 2019).

This culminated in military intervention: on July 3, 2013, following three days of mass anti-Morsi demonstrations backed by an alliance of the judiciary and the police (Darwisheh 2019), the SCAF staged a coup and overthrew Morsi (Topak, Mekouar and Cavatorta 2022; Darwisheh 2019). The military took power under the leadership of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (Mühlberger and Alaranta 2020). The subsequent violent crackdown on MB supporters and the arrest of the group's leadership effectively put any remaining visions of democratic transition "in the freezer" (Mühlberger and Alaranta 2020, p. 150). Instead of transitioning towards democracy, Egypt witnessed an authoritarian transformation (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012).

5.3. Democratic Failure and Return to Autocracy

5.3.1. Role of the military

As observed, the military has played a central and ultimately decisive role in the failure of Egypt's democratic transition after the Arab Spring and the subsequent return to autocracy. Their actions were driven by a combination of deeply entrenched institutional interests, economic privileges,

and a desire to maintain their historical position as the ultimate arbiters of power (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012; Aziz 2017). This centrality stems from the military's deep historical entrenchment in Egyptian politics (Hourani 1991; King 2009; Hassan 2011). All presidents since the 1952 coup came from a military background and the army often presented itself as a symbol of nationalism, unity and stability (Darwisheh 2019; Ottaway 2023). It had significant political clout and used it to secure substantial economic interests (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012; Nepstad 2013; Aziz 2017). However, Mubarak had structured civil-military relations to prevent coups and protect his family's succession interests, which included undermining the military's institutional and economic power relative to the security apparatus and the rising business elite (Aziz 2017; Korany and El-Mahdi 2012).

The tensions between Mubarak and the military became crucial during the 2011 uprising (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012). After the interior ministry was unable to contain the protests, the President called in the military, which did not crack down on the mass protests, partly because it was seen as distinct from the hated police and security services (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012; Aziz 2017), and partly because the army elite resented Gamal Mubarak's potential succession and his power base among business cronies whose wealth encroached upon the military's economic interests (Nepstad 2013; Korany and El-Mahdi 2012; Ardıç 2012). With Mubarak's resignation, the SCAF assumed de facto executive authority, claiming to protect the revolution and manage the transition (Hourani 1991; Darwisheh 2019) while actually seeking to safeguard their own interests and autonomy (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012; Darwisheh 2019).

The transition was overseen by institutions of the old regime, including the military, judiciary, police, and bureaucracy, which were not dismantled, effectively fragmenting the social forces that drove the uprising (Darwisheh 2019). Moreover, they pressed for early parliamentary elections before a new constitution was drafted, preventing a unified front that could challenge the SCAF (Ibid.). When unwanted results were produced, the military intervention was decisive; Morsi's presidency was undermined by other state institutions (Ibid.), and when he attempted to consolidate power, it antagonized the military and non-Islamist forces (Ibid.). Amid mass protests against Morsi's rule in June 2013, the military, backed by an alliance of wealthy business elites, security services, and other state entities, removed Morsi from office on July 3, 2013 (Darwisheh 2019).

Since Sisi formally assumed the presidency in 2014, Egypt has reverted to an authoritarian and repressive regime, described as more autocratic and repressive than at any other point in the country's history (Topak, Mekouar and Cavatorta 2022). The military is overtly at the helm of governance under Sisi, who relies on the military as the foundation of the ruling elite, with civilian officials often serving subordinated to the military's agenda (Aziz 2017). This military-judicial-police dominance has been institutionalized through the 2014 constitution, placing the authority of the military beyond civilian control (Darwisheh 2019), and while elections are still held, they serve primarily as a legitimizing tool (Aziz 2017). Ultimately, the military's actions, driven by a desire to protect its institutional autonomy, economic power, and traditional political influence, were the primary factor in derailing the democratic transition in Egypt.

5.3.2. Islamic movements and secular forces

The intricate relationship between Islamic movements, particularly the MB, and secular forces played significant, yet often conflicting, roles in the failure of Egypt's democratic transition and subsequent return to autocracy.

The sudden rise of the MB to dominance in parliament and the presidency was alarming to various other political actors (Aziz 2017). Rumors spread that the MB would turn Egypt into a theocracy, and Morsi's attempt to assert civilian authority intensified these fears (Ibid.). The eventual backlash led to comprehensive repression, with the post-Morsi regime engaging in enhanced repression against both Islamist and secular dissidents. The fervor of Islamization died down, followed by despondency and arrests (Darwisheh 2019; Kadri 2016).

Meanwhile, secular forces were unable to effectively compete with Islamist organizations; these parties and groups were often weak, fragmented, lacked electoral experience, and were slow to adapt to the demands of competitive politics (Darwisheh 2019). Furthermore, they were deeply concerned about the electoral success and potential dominance of Islamists, fearing a transformation into an Islamic state and a threat to civil liberties (Darwisheh 2019). Consequently, they increasingly came to depend on judicial or military intervention to check the power of the MB (Darwisheh 2019), leading to some activists and former Mubarak business elites forming movements like Tamarod that, while initially protesting Morsi, ultimately supported and legitimized the repressive policies against both Islamists and critics of the military's return (Aziz 2017; Darwisheh 2019).

This interaction between Islamic movements and secular forces was a critical factor in the failure of Egypt's democratic transition. Polarization and a lack of unity emerged, with no unified front to manage a transition to stable democracy (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012; Darwisheh 2019). Additionally, there was mutual fear and distrust, with seculars fearing an Islamist takeover while Islamists feared being suppressed by a secular regime (Darwisheh 2019). Most critically, this deep polarization provided an opening for the military to act as an arbiter, exploiting the divisions and fears to serve their institutional and economic interests (Darwisheh 2019; Aziz 2017). The end result was the suppression of both sides, effectively dismantling the key groups that had driven the uprising and sought democratic change (Darwisheh 2019; Kadri 2016).

5.3.3. Economic elites

The failure of the transitional governments to quickly address the deep-seated economic problems and fulfill the popular demands for social justice and a better life led to widespread disappointment and eroded their legitimacy. Central to understanding this failure is recognizing the power of deep-rooted economic interests; economic elites, who were beneficiaries of the old authoritarianism under Nasser, Sadat, and particularly Mubarak, grew and became a rent-seeking urban and rural elite (King 2009). Privatization of state assets, including enterprises and land, was politicized, primarily benefiting these economic elites (King 2009) and creating a "marriage between wealth and political authority" (King 2009, p. 119). In exchange for loyalty to the authoritarian state, this class siphoned off state resources, using electoral politics under Mubarak as a mechanism for rent-seeking and benefiting from immunity from prosecution (Aziz 2017). They became a crucial social base of support for Mubarak's authoritarian rule.

For these elites, the transition represented an existential threat, jeopardizing their privileged status and wealth accumulated under the old regime (Ardıç 2012), which motivated their funding of opposition parties and politicians using private-sector media critical of the MB (Darwisheh 2019).

The new authoritarian system under Sisi continues to feature economic liberalization and relies on a ruling coalition anchored by these same rent-seeking elites (King 2009). The military and police now exert significant control over the parliament, which is comprised of loyal rent-seeking elites (Darwisheh 2019). The system has transitioned from a civilian electoral authoritarianism led by a business elite to a military electoral authoritarianism led by the generals but still characterized by cronyism (Aziz 2017).

6. Case Study: Tunisia

6.1. Pre-2011: Ben Ali's Regime

Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's rise to power and fall after nearly twenty-five years in office were both unexpected (Hill 2016; Wolf 2024). Taking power through a constitutional coup in November 1987 (King 2009), Ben Ali's regime had high organizational power and maintained a strong ruling party and coercive apparatus, exercising considerable control over the country's economy (Hill 2016). Ben Ali positioned himself as a reformer, presenting his regime as a modernizing and democratizing force (Ibid.) by implementing changes such as renaming the ruling political party from the "Socialist Destour" to the "Democratic Constitutional Rally" (RCD) (King 2009), opening the country to democratic reform, human rights, and national reconciliation, shifting towards pluralism and competitive elections, and ending presidency-for-life by limiting the presidential terms to three (Ibid.).

Notwithstanding, these reforms concealed a different reality, representing a disguise for a new form of authoritarian rule, specifically a "crony capitalist and landlord spoils system", therefore becoming a closed authoritarian or hegemonic electoral authoritarian system, according to King (2009). State-led economic liberalization became a key mechanism, designed to support the new authoritarianism rather than lead to full opening, favoring the rent-seeking urban and rural elite, and privatizing state assets that provided the regime with patronage resources to form a new ruling coalition with this elite, which included private-sector capitalists, landed elites, military officers, and top state officials.

This economic strategy was accompanied by systematic control over civil society, transforming major voluntary associations, such as labor unions, into corporatist organs. While the UGTT had a strong initial position, having access to policymaking and representation within the ruling party structure and National Assembly, it began playing a subordinate role as the regime kept tight controls over labor, centralizing the union and isolating its leadership (King 2009). Political control was enforced through comprehensive repression, With disregarded rights and a corrupted judiciary system barely being concealed, Ben Ali's rule was characterized by its "iron fist state coercion" approach. Similarly, electoral law was heavily weighted in favor of Ben Ali and the RCD, with the 2008 constitutional amendment, which set difficult criteria for presidential candidates, disqualifying most potential opposition in the 2009 election (Hill 2016).

Ben Ali's embrace of a kleptocratic form of neoliberalism enriched a narrow inner circle and created stark class divisions (Maryon 2024), while his secularizing claims and suppression of Islamist currents fostered ideological tensions beneath the surface of ruling-party hegemony (Hill 2016; King 2009). His regime heavily regulated civil society, using state-controlled associations to perpetuate authoritarianism and suppress independent organization beyond co-opted entities like the national labor union leadership (King 2009; Zayani 2022). This brittle system, built on benefiting a narrow elite and controlling organized life while suppressing underlying tensions, proved vulnerable when mass protests, fueled by socio-economic grievances and a deep erosion of the regime's legitimacy, triggered shifts among key elite groups and led to its rapid collapse (Maryon 2024).

6.2.Revolutionary Process and Democratic Promise

Ousted on January 14th, amid mass protests, Ben Ali left for Saudi Arabia; his departure was not planned nor expected. On January 13th, while addressing Tunisians, he had acknowledged mistakes, appealed for forgiveness, and promised not to seek another term; prominent opposition figures accepted his pledges and were willing to move towards political reform and reconciliation, not revolution (Wolf 2024).

However, a series of misinterpretations led to the regime’s collapse: Samir Tarhouni, commander of Tunisia's Antiterrorism Brigade, approached the airport believing that Ben Ali’s family was fleeing the country with their fortune, and when reporting it, he also believed that Ben Ali was escaping. Acting alone and without orders, he tried to convince the head of the Intervention Force that the President was leaving. What actually happened was that Ben Ali’s family was exiting the country, seeking safety until the situation calmed down in Tunisia and Ben Ali regained control, since a big portion of the anger was directed towards them; however, no one thought Ben Ali was going to be overthrown that day (Wolf 2024). This misunderstanding had cascading effects; Ben Ali’s decision to join his family on a plane to Saudi Arabia was made based on the belief that he could return shortly. Soon after his departure, the rumor circulated that he had left to seek exile abroad, which promptly became the generally accepted narrative, propagated by celebrations and international media reporting that he had fled after protests culminating in a “people power victory,” which simultaneously strengthened the protest movement.

In the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali's departure, a constitutional crisis ensued; a group of high officials, including the prime minister and ministers of defense and interior, met to discuss the situation. At 6:45 p.m., Ghannouchi announced on television that he had invoked Article 56 to assume the function of interim president, stating Ben Ali was temporarily incapable of exercising power; however, the Constitutional Council later ruled that Article 57 applied, bestowing the interim presidency on the head of parliament, Fouad Mebazaa, who took office on January 15, 2011.

This instability continued until new leadership emerged, and, eventually, Mohamed Ghannouchi was forced to resign on February 27th, dissolving the government. The new prime minister, Beji Caid Essebsi, announced free elections for a constituent assembly, which were held on October 23, 2011, resulting in a government formed by an alliance between the Islamic Renaissance Movement (Ennahda) and two secular parties, the Congress for the Republic and the Caucus for Labor and Liberties.

Ben Ali’s fall unleashed profound changes and revealed underlying structural factors, bringing competing ideological visions to the forefront (Elbanna 2022; Zayani 2022). After the revolution, the political scene liberalized, allowing many political parties, including Islamist and secular ones, to form and compete openly (Ottaway 2023; Zayani 2022). The victory of Ennahda in the 2011 elections for the National Constituent Assembly, securing 41% of the vote, immediately triggered intense debate about Islam's role in Tunisian politics and the future constitution (Hill 2016; Ardıç 2012).

Understanding the rapid collapse requires examining intra-elite dynamics (Grinin and Kortayev 2022), specifically tensions between the army and the privileged security forces that were under Ben Ali's special care (Ibid.). This dynamic led to the army siding with the protesters, which is presented as the determining factor in the swift collapse of Ben Ali's authoritarian regime (Ibid.).

Tunisia’s simpler power structure, residing primarily in the presidency, facilitated this transition, unlike neighboring Egypt or Algeria, though challenges remained (Ottaway 2023). While not having a powerful “deep state” may have aided the initial transition by decapitating the regime more “clinically” (Ottaway 2023; Hill 2016), the Ministry of the Interior and police apparatus, pillars of the former regime, retained significant power and were involved in restoring old authoritarian practices like repressive policing of protests after 2015 (Maryon 2024; Topak,

Mekouar and Cavatorta 2022). Nevertheless, civil society experienced significant transformation, becoming more diverse, autonomous, and vibrant, with new laws facilitating the formation of organizations and increased citizen participation (Zayani 2022). It also played a crucial mediation role in resolving political crises, notably in brokering the national dialogue that led to a consensual roadmap in 2013 (Ibid.). The transition culminated in genuine democratic elections, held on October 23, 2011 (Ibid.), they were judged as "free and fair" by international observer missions (Hill 2016) and resulted in Ennahda forming a three-party ruling coalition with two secular parties, demonstrating an initial willingness to forge alliances across ideological lines (Zayani 2022).

6.3.Democratic Experience (2011-2021)

6.3.1. Constitutional reforms

The 2014 Tunisian constitution and the political arrangements surrounding its adoption represent a significant moment characterized by compromise between competing ideological blocs, specifically Islamists and secularists/non-Islamists (Elbanna 2022; Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022). This period followed a phase of intense political clashes and an acute political crisis that risked derailing the transitional process (Elbanna 2022; Zayani 2022). The resolution of this crisis required external mediation, a role filled by civil society actors, most notably the National Dialogue Quartet (comprising the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), the Tunisian Human Rights League, the National Bar Association, and the Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), pushing political elites towards a national agreement (Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022; Zayani 2022).

The resulting constitutional compromise involved significant concessions from all sides, particularly from Ennahda (Zayani 2022), including eliminating references to shariʿa as a source of legislation and limiting references to Islam to a statement that Islam is the religion of Tunisia, consistent with the 1956 Constitution (Ottaway 2023). The document declared Tunisia a civil state based on citizenship, the will of the people, and the supremacy of law (Ibid.). Additionally, Ennahda agreed to relinquish control of the cabinet to an interim, technocratic government (Ibid.).

While this consensus-based political model initially aimed to stabilize the nascent democracy and prevent polarization (Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022), this "fragile reconciliation" (Elbanna 2022, p. 50) served to mask rather than resolve underlying tensions. The agreement involved signing documents and avoiding confrontation on "truly contentious substantive issues", essentially

"paper[ing] over simmering mistrust and anger" (Yerkes, et al. 2022, p. 46). Most critically, this elite-driven agreement undermined economic reform capacity, the reliance on consensus politics gave corporate representatives like the UGTT and UTICA, who were part of the mediating Quartet, significant veto power (Elbanna 2022). This leverage enabled them to block necessary structural economic reforms that had distributional effects for different social groups, such as wage bill reduction, subsidy control, and tax reform (Elbanna 2022; Yerkes and Henneberg 2024).

The broader consequences were devastating for democratic legitimacy. Described as an "opportunistic marriage of convenience" or a "rotten compromise," this consensus model weakened the distinction between the ruling coalition and the opposition, leading to a lack of strong opposition and resulting in watered-down policies and an ineffective legislative agenda (Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022). This failure to improve living conditions and address economic grievances led to a "disconnection between leadership and parties' constituencies" and the alienation of people from politics (Ibid., p. 43). This disillusionment paved the way for anti-politics and populist discourses, which President Kais Saied later capitalized on (Ibid.).

6.3.2. Political parties and civil society

Tunisian political life since 2011 has been marked by significant polarization, primarily along ideological lines between Islamists and secularists (Elbanna 2022). This conflict manifested in political clashes between Islamist and secular elites, particularly between 2011 and 2013 (Ibid.). Secular forces, notably the newly-founded Nidaa Tounes party led by Essebsi, which positioned itself as a counterweight to Ennahda, harbored deep suspicions and fears regarding Islamist parties like Ennahda (Zayani 2022). Secularists feared an Islamist takeover of the state through elections or that their rise would mean rolling back the gains of a civil state (Ibid.). Conversely, Islamists feared being forced back underground by future secular regimes, a concern amplified by events in Egypt (Ibid.). These fundamental divisions have persisted and intensified over time, continuing to fuel political struggle (Elbanna 2022). Attempts to delegitimize Ennahda through discourse presenting them as synonymous with terrorism have been prominent since 2015 (Maryon 2024). This rhetoric, along with repressive policing targeting Ennahda figures, intensified under President Kais Saied, especially after the July 2021 power grab (Ibid.).

Adding to this polarization, Ennahda's own strategic choices in their attempt to gain legitimacy paradoxically diluted its popular support (Marzouki 2022). The fragmentation of political parties

and deepening partisan divides contributed to a fractured parliament and increased political uncertainty (Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022).

Despite this political division, Tunisia saw a significant increase in civil society activity, with thousands of NGOs and associations established and political parties legalized (Zayani 2022). However, while the initial strength and dynamism of civil society had significant limitations, and while these groups were successful in forming broad coalitions to push for certain changes, such as the anti-gender-based-violence law in 2017 (Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022), their capacity to influence the democratic transition was restricted when it came to addressing "deep structural issues" (Zayani 2022, p. 25).

6.3.3. Economic challenges

Economic failures paved the way for populism (Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022). The initial uprising was significantly fueled by social and economic conditions, with revolutionary slogans demanding "freedom, jobs, and dignity" (Kaboub 2013). Despite political gains after 2011, successive governments failed to tackle deep financial and economic crises, such as high unemployment, rising social grievances, endemic corruption, and a worsening fiscal situation (Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022). This inability to meet socioeconomic expectations eroded the legitimacy of the transition and its democratic system (Marzouki 2022). The economic challenges created an ideal context for the emergence and success of populist leaders like President Kais Saied, who capitalized on anger and disenchantment with traditional politics (Marzouki 2022; Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022).

The continuation of problematic neoliberal policies was central, as post-uprising transition governments largely carried over the pre-uprising economic policy framework (Kaboub 2013), despite evidence that decades of neoliberal restructuring had weakened the economy, caused severe socio-economic dislocation, increased inequality, and fueled corruption (Ibid.). These policies often involved measures like privatization and austerity, which benefited a small elite connected to the state while harming the majority (Farha 2015). Governments prioritized power-sharing and political stability over adopting difficult but necessary structural economic reforms (Kaboub 2013). The perpetuation of austerity measures, such as reducing state subsidies, caused rising costs of living and increased poverty (Maryon 2024). The failure to put forward an alternative economic program contributed significantly to the lack of progress in meeting the demands of the revolution (Kaboub 2013).

Among the most visible failures were rising youth unemployment and persistent regional disparities (Kaboub 2013). Additionally, regional disparities persisted, with disadvantaged inner regions suffering from a lack of economic opportunity and unfair distribution of wealth compared to coastal areas (Zayani 2022). Demands for inclusive regional development and equitable wealth distribution were largely unmet by substantive initiatives (Ibid.). These unresolved issues fueled continued social protests and contributed to the widespread popular discontent that delegitimized the ruling elites and their democratic governance (Ibid.).

6.4. Kais Saied and Democratic Regression (2021-2024)

This context created an ideal environment for the rise of populism. Kais Saied, campaigning as an "outsider" with no political party or prior governing experience (Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022), effectively capitalized on this widespread anger and disenchantment with the status quo politicians. He was elected president with a large majority of votes (Marzouki 2022). The general elections in 2019 also resulted in a fragmented parliament with no decisive victory for any party, making the formation of stable coalitions difficult (Zayani 2022).

Growing conflicts between the president and parliament, as well as infighting between parliamentary blocs, led to political gridlock and ineffective policymaking (Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022). In response to mounting socioeconomic grievances, anti-austerity, and anti-government protests, and frustration with the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic (Maryon 2024), President Saied invoked extraordinary powers on July 25, 2021 (Elbanna 2022). He dismissed Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and suspended the elected parliament (Elbanna 2022). He also rescinded the legal immunity of legislators and indicated they would face public prosecution (Marzouki 2022). Saied contended that he was taking these measures in the name of the 2014 Constitution, specifically citing Article 80, the same article outlining procedures for a state of emergency (Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022). However, his interpretation was seen as a creative reading of the article and an expansive use of security measures (Maryon 2024). Critics and observers widely interpreted his actions as a constitutional coup or a self-coup. Saied's actions involved concentrating power in a way the 2014 constitution prohibited (Marzouki 2022). The public, frustrated with democracy's failure to deliver economic dividends and seeing Saied as a figure who would break the gridlock and fight corruption, initially supported his actions (Yerkes and Henneberg 2024). A crucial factor enabling the coup was the readiness of the Tunisian Armed

Forces (TAF) to support Saied by blocking access to the prime minister's office and parliament building, which marked a departure from their previous stance of neutrality.

Having seized power, Saied systematically dismantled democratic institutions, extending the suspension of parliament beyond the initial thirty days (Ottaway 2023) and later effectively dissolving it. He suspended most of the 2014 constitution and dissolved the Supreme Judicial Council, the highest independent judicial body established to protect judicial independence (Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022). This action aimed to weaken the independence of the judiciary and grant himself broad powers to interfere in its work (Elbanna 2022). Saied also granted himself the exclusive right to enact laws by decree. He then published a draft of a new constitution (Elbanna 2022) that radically redesigned the political system, cementing Islam as the state religion and curtailing rights and freedoms (Elbanna 2022). This new constitution significantly increased broad autonomy and powers for the president at the expense of both the prime minister and parliament (Elbanna 2022). Saied held a highly problematic referendum on this new constitution in August 2022, which ultimately passed (Maryon 2024).

Additionally, Saied implemented comprehensive repression while crafting a populist justification, targeting civil society and restricting fundamental rights and liberties (Elbanna 2022). This aligns with an authoritarian playbook aiming to dismantle competing power centers (Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022). Measures include politically targeted arrests and detentions (Maryon 2024), curtailing freedoms of expression and the press (Elbanna 2022), controlling the judiciary (Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022), weakening parliament, undermining independent institutions, and increased reliance on security forces (Ibid.). These actions were backed by a populist narrative, with Saied portraying himself as saving the state from corrupt elites (Ibid.) or external plots (Maryon 2024), often using vague accusations against political opponents, particularly suggesting Ennahda are “traitors” or “conspiring with external forces”. The referendum on the new constitution in August 2022 was framed as a way to codify his extrajudicial policies (Yerkes and Henneberg 2024) and rebuild the political system (Yerkes, McCoy, et al. 2022).

Nonetheless, Saied continues facing growing challenges and, although fragmented, opposition (Cherif 2022). Saied's authoritarian stance towards opponents is described as ominous (Marzouki 2022). The regime's systematic repression and control measures have made organizing opposition difficult (Yerkes and Henneberg 2024). Voter turnout in the 2022 constitutional referendum was

low (Yerkes and Henneberg 2024), suggesting a lack of widespread engagement, despite the outcome. Elections held under the new system were widely contested, with candidates banned (Maryon 2024). Potential presidential candidates have been arrested, with some receiving sentences banning their participation in electoral politics (Yerkes and Henneberg 2024). Domestic election watchdogs have been prohibited from observing elections, accused of receiving "suspicious foreign funding," a tactic described as a common populist trope (Yerkes and Henneberg 2024). Saied's aggressive attitude toward foreign donors has also alienated potential investors and donors (Marzouki 2022). Despite the consolidation of power, Tunisia continues to face significant economic difficulties (Marzouki 2022; Cherif 2022).

7. Comparative Analysis and Conclusions

7.1. Patterns of democratic failure

Coming almost 40 years after than the third democratization wave, the Arab Spring was a means of hope for a first-time democratic transformation in the Middle East and North Africa. Nonetheless, no country that participated in the uprisings has democracy today; whether immediately or ten years later, all countries have reverted to autocratic regimes.

The beginning was promising for Tunisia, which held elections within nine months of Ben Ali's fall, dissolved existing institutions for a fresh start, and maintained a largely apolitical military. In contrast, Egypt's transition was slower and more fragile, elections came fifteen months after Mubarak's fall, while the military and judiciary actively destabilized the democratization process. Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces maintained political control, dissolving parliament and suppressing opposition, ultimately replacing one authoritarian regime with another —only now the military generals ruled openly.

Despite these different starting points, both countries share fundamental weaknesses that explain their autocratic regression. Neither successfully addressed the deep socioeconomic grievances that initiated the uprisings; unemployment, poverty, and regional inequalities continued, eroding public support for new democratic institutions.

Compounding these economic failures was destructive political polarization, most significantly the division between Islamist and secular movements rooted in deep mistrust, making effective governance impossible.

Elite resistance and the exploitation of institutional weaknesses further destabilized democratic consolidation. Tunisia's failure to establish a constitutional court left its democratic framework incomplete, while Egypt's judiciary actively collaborated with military forces to dismantle democratic gains.

The cumulative effect of these failures was public disillusionment that opened the door to authoritarianism; citizens lost faith in democratic systems and the prospect that there would be any prosperity or stability, which translated into the low voter turnout that both countries experienced and enabled the rise of populism and “authoritarian nostalgia”. Finally, external factors

compounded these internal weaknesses. Limited and inconsistent international support for democratization left both countries vulnerable to anti-democratic forces. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic crises provided a final blow, particularly in Tunisia, where President Kais Saied exploited public frustration to ultimately dismantle democratic institutions, revealing that successful democratization requires more than removing autocrats or holding elections.

7.2.Role of competing ideologies

Democratic transitions naturally involve ideological contestation, but the polarization in Egypt and Tunisia transcended normal political disagreement. The deep fractures between Islamist and secular forces undermined democratic consolidation in both countries through different mechanisms and timelines. Understanding this requires examining what successful transitions achieve, typically requiring "consensual unity" on basic constitutional frameworks, despite policy disagreements (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Linz and Stepan 1996). Both countries lacked this foundation. Democracy works when political actors accept uncertainty about outcomes while agreeing on procedural rules, a balance neither achieved (Przeworski 2019).

Ideological divisions were handled differently; Tunisia managed these differences better through the National Dialogue Quartet's mediation. However, rather than resolving fundamental disagreements about religion's role in governance, the process merely masked them, creating vulnerabilities that made it easy for President Saied to exploit. Egypt, by contrast, saw immediate confrontation; the Muslim Brotherhood adopted a "winner-takes-all" approach after their electoral victory, sidelining the revolutionary movements that had toppled Mubarak. This intensified existing divisions and pushed secular revolutionaries into temporary alignment with remnants of the Mubarak regime (Korany and El-Mahdi 2012). This unlikely coalition facilitated the military's return to power.

These conflicts reflected decades of contradictory state policies. Despite being Muslim majority countries, elites accustomed to state-enforced secularism were alarmed, creating competing visions of governance that turned constitutional processes into ideological battlegrounds. Tunisia's acknowledgment yet avoidance of sharia references reflected Ennahda's pragmatism, while Egypt's hasty process under Morsi was viewed by secular forces as threatening, despite its similarities to Tunisia's. The difference was not just in the text but in the process and the absence of trusted mediating institutions in Egypt.

Furthermore, military and security establishments exploited these ideological fears, using anti-Islamic rhetoric to justify their power grab, showing what Marzouki (2022) calls the "toxic impact" of weaponized anti-Islamist sentiment, succeeding partly because many secular actors prioritized opposing Islamists over defending democratic principles.

These experiences reveal important lessons for future democratic transitions, which demand substantive engagement with fundamental questions about religion and state. Superficial consensus without addressing underlying conflicts creates vulnerabilities that authoritarian actors can exploit.

7.3.Elite intervention dynamics

Elite dynamics played out in strikingly different ways, with the military's position making all the difference. In Egypt, the army is not just part of the state; it has been the state since Nasser's 1952 coup. Tunisia tells the opposite story: its military, deliberately weakened by Ben Ali, stayed out of politics after the revolution, making it easier for Tunisia's democratic experiment to get off the ground. Though their neutrality created unprecedented issues; without a powerful armed force, the system gradually eroded from within. Thus, it is evident that a balanced power agreement, however messy, preserves democratic space.

The economic oligarchy was equally problematic; when democracy threatens the bank accounts of the privileged, they fight back, regardless of what political banner they wave. Most revealing was how state institutions were weaponized. Egypt's judges dissolved the elected parliament with the stroke of a pen, while Tunisia's bureaucracy and police gradually reasserted control. Neither country managed to reform these power centers, showing that changing who sits in the presidential palace means little when the machinery of government remains captured by counter-revolutionary forces.

Despite different timelines, both cases reveal the same underlying pattern, demonstrating that free elections and new constitutions are not enough; a democratic transition requires neutralizing or converting powerful elites who otherwise destabilize the system from within. Until we recognize that elite intervention strategies determine the fate of revolutions, we will continue to see promising democratic openings collapse in the Middle East and North Africa.

7.4. Civil society limitations

My research into Egypt and Tunisia shows that civil society organizations could not maintain the momentum they created during the initial uprisings. Despite their different starting points, both countries' activist networks gradually lost their ability to influence the political process.

Tunisia began with real advantages; the UGTT labor federation had kept some independence under Ben Ali, but Egypt had nothing comparable, its unions remained under the government's thumb, and professional groups lacked the muscle to push back against the security apparatus. Yet both countries showed a similar pattern: street protesters could not convert their revolutionary energy into lasting political power. The loose networks that successfully mobilized demonstrations were terrible at making strategic decisions or building lasting institutions. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood's decades of organizational experience gave them an insurmountable advantage.

Class and ideological divides cut deeply through civil society in both countries. Urban, educated activists often spoke a different political language than rural and working-class citizens. When constitutional debates began, civil society organizations spoke with too many conflicting voices to shape the outcome effectively.

The limitations I have documented matter because transitions need more than just the spark of revolution, they require sustained pressure through years of uncertainty. When revolutionary movements splinter or run out of steam, as happened in both countries, it creates space for old regime elements to reassert control. This supports my central argument that civil society weaknesses, combined with elite manipulation and ideological divisions, ultimately doomed both democratic experiments.

7.5. Implications for democratization in MENA

I have come to see Egypt and Tunisia's failures as stemming from what I call a "democratic vulnerability triangle," where ideological conflicts, elite resistance, and fractured civil society feed off each other in ways that scholars like O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) never fully appreciated. My thesis consistently revealed how these factors amplified each other, when Islamists and secularists treated politics as a zero-sum game, it created perfect openings for military brass and business elites to step in as supposed stability guarantors. No single problem killed these democracies; it was their toxic that proved fatal.

My evidence suggests that in post-revolutionary Arab contexts, certain reforms must happen in a particular order. Tunisia's experience proves this point; despite doing almost everything “right” constitutionally and maintaining democracy for a decade, it still fell to autocracy. Managing powerful elites turned out to be more crucial than perfecting constitutional language.

Applying this framework to other regional cases reveals similar patterns. For Ahmed Al-Sharaa’s Syria, viewed through this lens, his success will depend on how the aforementioned triangle is handled and whether the interim government stabilizes during this period of uncertainty whilst maintaining their legitimacy and support of the military, civil society, and elites.

Morocco tells a different story; the king defused revolutionary pressure through limited reforms while keeping his essential powers. Western governments barely pushed Morocco toward real democracy, unlike their rhetoric toward Tunisia and Egypt, exposing what I believe is their true priority: stability and security cooperation exceed democratic development, especially with longtime allies.

I have watched regimes across the region study these failures and adapt —what I will call “authoritarian learning.” Algeria, Sudan and others have developed sophisticated techniques to prevent similar democratic breakthroughs, allowing some protests while targeting organizers, mouthing reform language while gutting its substance, and exploiting ideological divisions to fragment opposition.

For future transitions to succeed, we need genuine toleration between religious and secular forces, but I would also add that security sector reform must come first, not later; we must deliver quick benefits to ordinary citizens and replace winner-takes-all politics with power-sharing.

Finally, this research shows that democratic openings will keep failing until the elite security dilemma, where military and security forces view democracy itself as an existential threat, is addressed. Democratic gains will remain fragile if economic interests and ideological fears are not confronted. Building lasting democracy means rethinking transition processes in ways that traditional theories miss, acknowledging the region-specific challenges that make textbook democratization approaches insufficient.

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