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After the Arab Uprisings: resilience or transformation?

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Commentary

After the Arab Uprisings: resilience or transformation?

Viola Sarnelli¹

Abstract

This article looks at the ongoing political changes in two non-democratic regimes moving beyond the 'authoritarian resilience' model. Five years after the Arab Uprisings, Jordan and Algeria seem to have resisted the revolutionary wave that has shaken the whole MENA region. According to the old debate informed by 'authoritarian resilience' and 'democratic transition' models, a series of obstacles in the political, economic or social sphere would prevent a successful 'transition' to democracy in some countries more than in others. Despite the criticisms addressed to the classical version of these models, they still influence most of the explanations of what happened after 2011, even though in their 'upgraded' version (Heydemann 2007; Heydemann and Leenders 2011). However, given the specific set of challenges and transformations each of the countries is going through, this framework becomes increasingly unsatisfactory. Jordan and Algeria are two profoundly diverse countries, and yet both are quite exceptional cases in their own right. Compared to other Arab monarchies, Jordan stands between the untouched authoritarian Gulf model and the constitutional reformist path followed by Morocco (Yom 2011; Yom and Gause 2012). As for Algeria, it was the only republic in the region to be apparently not affected by the regional turmoil (Volpi 2013). Still, in order to survive the 2011 protests, both regimes were forced to approve a number of 'facade' reforms. This article argues that such reforms, despite being mostly formal concessions, seen from a different angle could also be a starting point for more substantial long-term transformations. After all, does a truly "resilient" authority, elite or regime really exist?

Authoritarian regimes after 2011: new and old 'obstacles' to 'transition'

Traditionally, authoritarian regimes have been characterised by political theorists as being fundamentally weak, "due to the absence of any of the checks on power that the rule of law, the separation of powers, or popular contestability would afford" (Gilley 2003: 1). The 2011 Uprisings seemed to have confirmed this weakness making even more evident the limits of authoritarian resilience models and particularly of the idea of an "Arab exceptionalism". At the same time, the years immediately following the Uprisings provided several examples of authoritarian regimes survival, based on their capacity to adapt to changing political, social, and economic condition. In their last version of the "authoritarian upgrading" model, Heydemann and Leenders suggested that "the capacity of some authoritarian regimes in the Middle East to suppress opposition movements can be explained, at least in part, by their capacity to learn from and adapt to the rapidly emerging challenges that mass uprisings posed for regime survival" (2011: 648). In this view, post-2011 regimes were not simply defensive or reactive. Rather, they implemented complex strategies aiming at preventing the emergence of internal splits within the ruling condition and their support base, by means of financial handouts to armed forces, security and public sector in general. Moreover, they developed "discourses aimed at affecting

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the strategic calculus of citizens, stressing the personal costs of participation in protests, as well as the negative consequences that would follow should the regimes be overthrown” (Heydemann and Leenders 2011: 650). At an international level, regimes also tried to “cultivating support from ‘counter-revolutionary’ allies and working to deter criticism and punitive measures from adversaries” (*ibid*).

While these points can explain some of the strategies adopted by many authoritarian countries in the last few years, they do not cover the variety of ongoing political transformations nor explain how things might change in the near future. More importantly, in all its variations, ‘authoritarian resilience’ models still seem to consider only one main set of transformations, those leading to a ‘transition’ towards an ideal democratic model, and the (political, social, economic) obstacles preventing its implementation. Yet, if we drop the assumption of an ideal democratic model (and particularly of a liberal democracy one) laying beyond the ‘transition’, we can focus more on the variety of options that might follow the authoritarian power networks transformation.

One of the problems of the ‘authoritarian resilience’ perspective, in fact, is that it often seems to rely on an essentialist, a-historical and abstract concept of power. These models do not usually account for the impact single individuals or actions could have within ruling elites, nor for the chain reaction which could result from introducing some (even small and formal) variations in their institutions.

What happened to most of these authoritarian countries after the Uprisings, then, has mostly been interpreted as a sign that they were ‘not ready yet’ for democratic changes. The reinforcement of military power, the ‘cosmetic changes’, or the new alliances stipulated with foreign powers and the tragic battles for power which took place in some of the countries could all be read as a combination of old and new obstacles impeding the ‘transition’. Still, we should be careful to draw any definitive conclusion, as in some states the political expectations expressed during the 2011 protests could be temporarily soothed but hardly reversible.

Algeria – new and old challenges

In Algeria protests started in December 2010, building on previous socioeconomic discontent worsened by the rise in food prices, high unemployment rates, and the lack of affordable housing. By the beginning of January, riots were reported in the whole country. As the protests continued, comparison with the 1988 riots started to loom over the new events. This time, though, participation of the Islamists groups and leaders was only marginal, and the response of the security forces was not brutal as in 1988 – thus, state repression itself did not become the cause of further protests (Volpi 2013). Most importantly, shortly after the riots began, the government swiftly intervened to lower the cost of staples, and within a few days most of the protests were considerably reduced. In this context, as Volpi observed, “even radical acts, such as a self-immolation on January 12, failed to reignite the contestation” (2013: 107).

This first wave of riots in the country, appeased by basic economic concessions (“the bread”) was followed by another of more systematic political demands (“the freedom and dignity” making the rest of the 2011 slogans). On January 20, several opposition parties, independent unions, and organizations formed the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (NCCD), to ask the government to intervene in a series of issues such as the emergency law, the media law, the imprisonment of protesters, and the lack of job opportunities. The NCCD organized a march for February 12, but before that the government announced that the state of emergency would soon be lifted, and promised other reforms. When protesters converged in Algiers answering NCCD’s call on February 12, they were dramatically outnumbered by police, as the movement failed to gain the support of other opposition forces. On February 24, the government officially lifted the 19-year-old state of emergency. This move

was soon balanced by the adoption of new 'antiterrorist' measures, but it still had great symbolic importance in the political climate of the time.

Meanwhile, at an international level, in March 2011 Algeria was one of the few members of the international community to oppose to the US/EU coalition intervention in Libya, even refusing to allow coalition aircraft to pass through Algerian airspace. It seemed the Algerian regime did not want to commit openly to move that would have been extremely unpopular among the population, despite the fact that the antiterrorism alliance with EU and US had actually been reinforced in the last decade. Another reason for Algerian leaders to oppose the intervention was the fear of terrorists' retaliations. Two years later in fact, in January 2013, a terrorist attack to the *In Amenas* gas plant, in which 29 militants and 37 international workers died, was presented by its perpetrators as payback for Algerian support to France in Mali. The menace of armed Islamist groups in Algeria clearly did not only come from the outside, as after the end of the civil war the state continued to be challenged by sporadic attacks from Islamist terrorist groups. The North-East of the country in particular was targeted by a number of suicide attacks in 2011, mainly against security forces. On September 2014 this long-standing conflict had a new international resonance when the French national Herve Gourdel was kidnapped and killed in the Kabyle region.

Although Bouteflika famously declared when he first was elected in 1999 that he would not allow his power to be limited by the military, his first two terms were marked by a de facto alliance with the head of military intelligence, General Mohamed Mediene, generally seen as the real ruler behind the scenes. This balance was eventually shaken by a series of decisions taken by Bouteflika during his last mandate, particularly between August and November 2015, when both the head of the military and head of counter-terrorism were arrested and put on trial. To many analysts, these manoeuvres do not necessarily mean Algeria is getting any more pluralistic. Instead, they might also point to the growing power of Bouteflika's clan over the rest of the country, with the support of an increasingly influential new business class, and of another wing of the military. In this view, the "new civilian trend" narrative cannot work as long as Algerian civil society, fragmented by decades of repression, violence, and clientelism, remains too weak to truly counterweight the power elite. In fact, it would be probably too optimistic to see these moves as a genuine government effort to promote stronger civilian control. Yet, as Algerian society is slowly recovering from the civil war trauma, these changes could eventually favour the process.

In terms of mobilisations, after the first reforms in 2011 the return to normality in the country included a persistently high number of demonstrations, mostly organised by professional associations and trade unions. As Volpi noticed, "The dynamics of these strikes... illustrate the continuing relevance of the traditional social contract proposed by the Algerian regime: the administration provides better socioeconomic conditions in exchange for continuing (albeit grudging) political quiescence" (2013: 110). In order to meet these requests, in May 2011 the Algerian government increased public sector spending by an impressive 25 percent. However, the 'resilience' of the Algerian regime clearly cannot count on oil resources forever, particularly in time of low prices. Furthermore, during Bouteflika mandates, despite the high rates of regime corruption, a part of those oil revenues were invested in public services throughout the country, such as infrastructure, housing, and higher education. These investments, although limited compared to those put in patronage networks, have surely contributed to the modernisation of that same Algerian society that is becoming increasingly tired of its rulers.

After lifting the state of emergency in April 2011, the government installed a constitutional commission in charge of reforms. In September 2011 a new media law was approved, finally putting an end to state monopoly over radio and television, and abolishing the imprisonment of journalists for libel. In order to encourage the (at least formal) participation of opposition forces, in October 2011 the government announced that all new parties applying for

recognition would be legalized before the end of the year. The proliferation of micro-parties that followed, though, resulted in an even higher fragmentation of the opposition. The only threat for the state could have come from a growing Islamist “Green Algeria alliance” – but new legislative amendments put a ban to political actors previously associated with the old Islamist armed forces, eliminating their most powerful figures. When the parliamentary elections took place, in May 2012, the President’s party, the National Liberation Front (FLN), maintained and even reinforced its position in terms of parliamentary seats. Born during the War of Independence from France, FLN still derives much of its legitimacy from the anti-colonial movement and represents what Entelis (1986) called “the revolution institutionalised”.

In April 2013, President Bouteflika suffered a stroke, and spent three months in France for treatments. During his absence, his brother Saïd seemed to consolidate his role as the real decision-maker. Despite his precarious health conditions, keeping him from appearing in public more than once a year, Abdelaziz Bouteflika won his 4th term as president in April 2014, at the age of 78. Preparing a post-Bouteflika scenarios is naturally the priority for the country. These could include the president’s brother (stepping forward personally or continuing to promote the clan’s interest behind the scenes) or some combined effort from the opposition parties. Moving towards this transition, on February 7 2016, the Algerian parliament adopted a reformed constitution which limits the number of successive presidential terms to two, in order to prevent new political monopolies. The new constitution also introduces other societal and political novelties. Following the example of Morocco, Algeria will fully recognise the Amazigh language as official alongside Arabic. Amendments also require the president to nominate a prime minister from the largest party in parliament and established an independent electoral commission. Again, several opposition parties boycotted the ballot, as previous reforms didn’t prevent the government from side-lining opposition movements.

Algeria has enormous challenges ahead; there is the urgent need to reform the economy and prevent a dire economic crisis, given that younger generations are paying for the establishment’s inability to diversify the domestic economy. A new financial bill approved by the parliament in November 2015 allowed for the privatisation of several state companies - but neoliberal reforms proved to be profoundly destabilising in the region if not matched by parallel social welfare strategy.

Jordan

Shortly after the protests began in January 2011, King Abdullah II dismissed Samir Rifai’s government and named the former army general Marouf al-Bakhit as the new prime minister. This early move, though, was not enough to appease the protesters. During the following months demonstrations continued weekly in Amman. In March, clashes with riot police intensified; in April the peak was reached with the self-immolation of a man outside prime minister’s office. Following these episodes, King Abdullah II reshuffled the cabinet once again in July, and in October 2011 Awn al-Khasawneh, a former judge at the International Court of Justice, become the country’s third prime minister in 2011. In April 2012, though, he also resigned, and Fayez al-Tarawneh succeeded him in May. In addition to this hectic turnover of prime ministers, King Abdullah II, ruling since 1999, tried to mitigate the protests with a series of reforms. Forty-one constitutional amendments, the establishment of a constitutional court and of a new Independent Election Commission, and the revision of the electoral law were all approved in a little more than one year.

According to several observers, this new push in institution reforms followed the path initiated the same year by Morocco’s King Mohammed VI. However, unlike in Morocco, changes in the constitution in Jordan were not approved by a popular referendum; even more than in Morocco, the reforms did not curb the king’s core powers nor move toward a real constitutional

monarchy. In addition, the unchecked and powerful security services, and the rife corruption level in the country were not touched by the new government changes in Jordan (Yom 2011). One of the most notable differences in the way the two monarchies approached political reforms is in their relation with Islamist organisations and parties active in both countries. A few years before the Uprisings, Clark and Joung (2008) already noticed how the family laws approved in the two countries reflected a different status of relations between the two monarchies and their influential Islamist counterparts. In Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and its political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), have repeatedly won the largest number of seats since 1989 and dominates the opposition movement. In Morocco, the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) has also won an increasing number of seats in the last two legislative elections. In terms of programme, both Islamist parties can be considered socially conservative. Still, in Morocco, the opening of a dialogue between the opposition and the monarchy, and the presence of stronger leftist forces and civil society organisations, influenced Islamists “to change what might appear to be rigid ideologies and adapt to contextual factors in ways that enhance their own success” (Clark and Joung 2008: 348).

After 2011, the interaction between the monarchy and its Islamist opposition in Jordan still seems to be one of the most problematic political issues. When the new 2012 electoral law had its first test in January 2013 elections, they were met by a massive boycott of Islamist parties, which considered the electoral law reform too limited, allowing them to take only a limited number of seats. As a result, the election lead once again to the victory of independent and tribal candidates loyal to the regime. The opposition grievances were also relate to the condition of Palestinian Jordanians, still dramatically underrepresented in parliament, as often denounced by political activists calling for a better political representation of all minorities (Ryan 2012).

Despite the contrasts on a political level, Islam plays a central role in Jordanian social life, and it is an important source of legitimacy for the ruling Hashemite family. Jordan is a majority Muslim country, with 94% of the population following Sunni Islam and a minority following Shia Islam, but compared to most neighbour countries the regime traditionally showed a higher degree of tolerance of other religion. The Christian minority, making up 6% of the population in the last statistics, used to account for a much higher percentage in the past (up 30% of the in the 1950s), but has since then decreased due to high rates of Muslim immigration into the country. Still, despite this apparent openness, attempts to reform the family law, which strongly disadvantages women – as can be seen from the lack of provisions against domestic violence, sexual harassment and unequal rights when divorcing – have always met with resistance from conservatives groups in the parliament.

After 2011, not all the new laws approved by the Jordanian government went necessarily in the direction of (formal or substantial) democratizing reforms. The new Press law approved in September 2012 included a tightening of the restrictions on Internet use, and required news web sites to obtain official licenses from the government in order to be online. Similarly, the June 2014 antiterrorism law also expanded the government power, by criminalizing the spread of extremist ideas and the actions and expressions disrupting the country’s foreign relations. Moreover, a moratorium on the death penalty started in 2006 ended on December 2014, when eleven men convicted of murder were executed. Overall, civil and political rights are in principle guaranteed in the country, but under restrictions imposed by the Interior Ministry and the intelligence service, and violations occur if deemed politically necessary by the rulers.

Within the MENA region, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has emerged then as “a key battleground between those who would like to see a more democratic region, and those who would like to maintain economic stability” (Helfont and Helfont, 2011). Surrounded by countries undergoing political turmoil or civil war, Jordan was finally forced, mostly due to its Western allies economic pressures to leave its traditional position of “island of stability” and join other regional and world powers in the Syrian conflict. In September 2014, the USA announced that Jordan was one of four Arab countries military supporting the airstrikes on ISIS. A few months

later, in February 2015, Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh was captured and killed by ISIS; Jordan responded by launching new air strikes and executing prisoners in retaliation.

Meanwhile, the flow of Syrian refugees was rapidly increasing in the country. By December 2014, approximately 620,000 Syrians had registered as refugees in Jordan, and unofficial estimates were much higher. In February 2015, European Union announced that it would provide Jordan with 100 million euros in loans to help the country deal with the refugee crisis. The conflict in Syria only added more complexity to the already difficult combination of different national groups in the country, as in the most evident case of the Palestinian Jordanians, who despite making up more than 30% of the whole population are only granted citizenship depending on their date of arrival in the country. As seen in the case of parliamentary elections, the division between Palestinians and East Bank Jordanians continues to be related to several problematic issues in the country. These two main groups in the country were joined since the 1990s by immigrant workers from Egypt, Iraq, South Asia and Southeast Asia, and Iraqi refugees after 2003. The escalation of the Syrian conflict introduced a further level of economic and social pressures to the rest of Jordanian society.

As summarised by Berger (2014), a number of strategies were employed by Jordanian monarchy and its domestic and international allies in order to immunize the country as much as possible from the new political pressures crossing the Arab world. The traditional mix of manipulating political institutions and processes, the exploitation of the refugee crisis as well as successful appeals for additional strategic “rents” from foreign donors (Barakat and Leber 2015) have so far allowed the Jordanian regime to avoid making more than cosmetic political reforms. Still, all these conditions are clearly not sustainable on the long terms. Both the refugees’ pressure and the military risks could force the monarchy to develop social and economic policies alternative to the dependency on foreign support; these could involve easier access to citizenship for Palestinians and possibly for other national groups, along with the development of a stronger and more inclusive economy.

Conclusion

As the cases of Algeria and Jordan show, 'the power' represented by authoritarian governments, when forced to approve even only 'cosmetic' changes, is entering a phase of transformations whose results are hard to foresee. In this sense, any authoritarian state, government or elite in the MENA region cannot be the same as it was before 2011, and therefore focusing on the “resilience” of authoritarian regimes might not be a useful analytical approach. Post 2011 regimes can be similarly oppressive or similarly corrupt, and based on equivalent patronage networks and rentier systems; still they will not be exactly the same systems, even though more visible changes are yet to come. In Algeria, the restructuring of the military power and the latest gains in terms of civil and political rights could lead to more progressive post-Bouteflika scenarios, if the opposition forces will finally manage to join their efforts to overcome the present fragmentation. In Jordan, the new pressure coming from Syrian refugees’ inflow might force the government to solve old social issues, such as that of citizenship rights for Palestinian Jordanians and their inclusion in the country’s political life, also by accepting a dialogue with Islamist parties and organisations. At the same time, the security and military threats resulting from Jordan’s international policies and alliances could convince the government to limit the dependency on foreign loans and aids, and to develop a more sustainable and inclusive national economy. In this light, this article suggests to put temporarily aside the two opposite and complementary frameworks of Authoritarian Resilience and Democratic Transition, to look at the variety of transformations these societies are going through, followed – although slowly and unwillingly - by their rulers in what could become a series of long-term chain reaction.

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