

# The puzzle of democratic divergence in the Arab world: theory confronts experience in Egypt and Tunisia

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## Main content

Article Preview :

THE ARAB UPRISINGS OF 2011-2012 -- popular protests that challenged authoritarian rule across the Middle East and North Africa took the world by surprise. The possibility that the Arab region might finally be loosening the chains of tyranny was electrifying. But within five years, this hope had largely been dashed. Popular mobilization had left in its wake a political scene littered with state collapse, civil war, and authoritarian regression. To pessimists, this glum reversal in the Arab world was inevitable. But to others, alternative paths were possible.

Nowhere is this differential possibility captured more clearly than in the comparison of Tunisia and Egypt. These two countries, similarly blessed with historically robust states and ethnically homogenous societies, were the first to shake off their long-lived dictators. At the start of the uprisings, these countries seemed best positioned to transition successfully to democracy. At the end of five years, however, the two countries found themselves in dramatically different places. Tunisia had succeeded in crossing the threshold of democratic transition. But Egypt had regressed, embracing authoritarian practices that were in some ways more repressive than what had come before.

What explains the divergent trajectories taken by these two countries? Could our theories of democratization, the product of three decades of extensive cross-regional study, have anticipated this outcome? And what do the experiences of Tunisia and Egypt say about the dynamics of democratization generally, and the possibility of further democratization in the Arab world specifically?

The goal of this article is fourfold. First, it seeks to cast light on a puzzling reality--the divergent trajectories taken by Tunisia and Egypt. As such, the article is focused on explaining an outcome in a specific historical case, rather than building a generalizable theory or testing it. (1) In line with this case-centric ambition, the article adopts an analytic approach that is eclectic rather than parsimonious, complex and multifactorial rather than theoretically spare and elegant.

Second, the article has ambitions to go beyond the analysis of a single pair of cases and reach for more generalizable knowledge about the dynamics of democratization. By confronting the divergent experiences of Tunisia and Egypt with a synthetic view of some of the classic approaches in democratization theory, the article aims to take stock of the utility of these different approaches and shed light on the scope conditions that might favor one approach over another.

Third, the article seeks to reflect more generally on the special lessons that the Arab uprisings have to teach theorists of democratization. Every regional spurt of democratization (whether fully successful or not) has brought theoretically distinctive insights to this literature--be it the role of learning/voluntarism (the lesson of the Latin American transitions of the 1980s), (2) the contribution of prior institutional endowment (highlighted by the African transitions of the early 1990s), (3) or the importance of international modeling and contagion (illustrated by the color revolutions of Eastern Europe). (4) The experience of the Arab world has important lessons for democratization theory as well, even if the outcome of...

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By the end of 2011, Tunisia had crossed the threshold of becoming an electoral democracy.<sup>2</sup> While this study was under way, ragtag groups of rebels steadily gained ground—with support from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in their successful quest to push Libya's dictator from power. By early 2012, a handover... To set the stage for this volume's exploration of political changes under way in the Arab world and past transition experiences elsewhere, we begin with an overview of the global trend toward greater numbers of democracies. We also discuss the difficulty of measuring democracy as well as the approach we use to identify polities that do and do not qualify as democracies. Lessons From Egypt and Tunisia. January 2016. DOI: 10.1007/978-1-137-59094-7. Algeria was the first country in the Arab world to experience an 'Arab spring' at least two decades before Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya were to undergo their democratic intifadas. Yet that democratic moment was quickly subverted by a military coup d'état followed by a decade – long bloody civil war costing the lives of 200,000 people or more. The Arab Spring, a revolutionary movement for democracy that swept across the Arab Middle East in 2010, has contributed to the downfall of several oppressive authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. The movement represented several uprisings that placed the United States in a precarious position. The Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions raise many questions. After liberation from Western colonialism, failed experiments with radical populism, Arab nationalism and state-led economic development in the 1950s and 1960s gave way to the stagnation and repression of dictatorships and absolute monarchies. During the decades since the 1960s, sclerotic authoritarian regimes have controlled every Arab country, with the (partial) exceptions of Lebanon and Kuwait. During the uprising in Tunisia and later during the Egyptian events, Al Jazeera riveted viewers all over the Arab world and in the Arab diaspora. But the insidious Islamist bent of its coverage is not reflective either of the protests themselves or of a large segment of its viewership. Defining Arab Nationalism 1 CHAPTER TWO. Early Stirrings: The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries 14 CHAPTER THREE. Sati' al-Husri's Theory of Arab Nationalism 49 CHAPTER FOUR. Arab Nationalism and Competing Loyalties: From the 1920s to the Arab Revolt in Palestine 75 CHAPTER FIVE. The Path to Nationalist Ascent: From the Palestinian Revolt to the Egyptian Revolution 107 CHAPTER SIX. The men and women of the nationalist generation who had sought the political unity of the Arab people must have cast weary eyes at one another when they heard their acknowledged leader call a truce with those they considered to be anti-unionists; they must have dropped their heads and thrown their hands in the air when he announced the onset of a.