

# TUNISIAN EXCEPTIONALISM OR CONSTITUTIONAL TIMING

## *A Comparison of Democratic Transitions in the Middle East*

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THE ARAB SPRING PROTESTS WERE GREETED WITH EUPHORIA, BUT THE RESULTING INSTABILITY, SECTARIANISM, AND EXTREME VIOLENCE IN SEVERAL MIDDLE EASTERN STATES HAVE LED SOME TO BELIEVE THAT THE TOPPLED DICTATORS MAY HAVE BEEN THE LESSER OF TWO EVILS. WHILE TUNISIA'S SUCCESSFUL DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION LOOKS LIKE AN ANOMALY IN ITS CURRENT REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT, EGYPT ALSO ACHIEVED A SIGNIFICANT HISTORIC MILESTONE WHEN IT ELECTED PRESIDENT MORSI IN FREE ELECTIONS. HOWEVER, HIS SHORT TENURE AND EGYPT'S BROADER FAILURE TO DEMOCRATIZE PROMPTS QUESTIONS AS TO HOW DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS CAN SUCCEED AFTER DICTATORSHIPS. BY COMPARING THE TUNISIAN AND EGYPTIAN DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION PROCESSES, THE ARTICLE SEEKS TO ELUCIDATE THE CAUSES OF THE DIFFERENCE IN OUTCOMES OF THE PROTESTS IN THESE TWO STATES. NEW POLITICAL ACTORS AND CERTAIN ANCIEN RÉGIME INSTITUTIONS PLAYED CRITICAL ROLES IN OUSTING THE DICTATORS, BUT WHAT PROVED CRUCIAL TO THE SUCCESS OF THE TRANSITION WAS WHETHER DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS TOOK PLACE BEFORE OR AFTER NEW CONSTITUTIONS WERE ADOPTED. THIS IS BECAUSE CONSTITUTIONAL TIMING DETERMINED WHETHER THE COUNTRY'S POLITICAL DESIGN WOULD BE DICTATED BY DIALOGUE AND DELIBERATION OR RUN AD-HOC BY THE POLITICAL ACTOR WITH THE GREATEST POPULARITY.

## INTRODUCTION

If there is any incontrovertible theory in political science, it is that democracies do not go to war with one another. This democratic peace theory, whose origins lie in philosopher Immanuel Kant's theory of perpetual peace, argues that shared liberal values amongst democracies and the constraints put on leadership by democratic institutions greatly reduces the likelihood of inter-democracy violent conflict.<sup>1</sup> This theory was the linchpin underlying the Clinton Administration's policy of democratic enlargement.<sup>2</sup> Democracy promotion has not fallen out of favor with more recent administrations: President Bush's administration argued that building a democratic Iraq was a valuable goal after evidence came out that Saddam Hussein did not possess weapons of mass destruction and President Obama emphasized democracy and human rights as part of his foreign policy goals in his 2009 Cairo speech.<sup>3</sup> Despite these rhetorical pledges, the United States' alliances with authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, whether based on oil or security concerns, undermined the realization of democracy in the region.

When the Arab Spring swept across the Middle East, from North Africa to the Persian Gulf, it seemed possible that democracy would autonomously emerge from the ashes of the long-standing authoritarian regimes. Recent examination of the causes of the Arab Spring underscores how decades of repression and corruption sowed the seeds for popular unrest in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> The protesters clamoring for regime change also augured new thinking about Arab political culture, which for so long had been defined by obedience to the whims of strongmen. The uprisings also illuminated the contradictions between the United States' priorities of democracy and stability in the region, pitting peaceful protesters against the police forces and militaries to whom the United States had given billions of dollars over the past several decades. Looking at the aftermath of the Arab Spring, with Egypt once again under repressive rule, and chaos and violence still raging in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, the democratic success in Tunisia seems to be an anomaly rather than a precedent for future democratic transitions in the Middle East.

The wide variation in outcomes of the protest movements of the Arab Spring is a quandary for political scientists, but this does not imply a lack of explanatory mechanisms. The failure of the Syrian revolt to topple longtime dictator Bashar al-Assad is in part attributable to the sectarian fault lines that exist in the country, causing ethnic groups who

did not necessarily approve of Assad's brutal actions to support his regime out of fear of the alternatives. Similarly, in Libya, the importance of clan and patronage ties under Muammar Gaddafi's regime created the conditions for a fractured state in which no single group holds a strong enough claim for legitimacy or the monopoly of force necessary to induce stability. Unlike these failed revolutionary movements, the Egyptian and Tunisian protest movements were successful in toppling their dictators. Subsequently, both held generally free and fair elections for the first time in their respective histories. Despite achieving this democratic milestone, Egyptians soon returned to the streets to protest their democratically elected president, which ultimately resulted in a popularly inspired coup by the Egyptian military on July 3, 2013. Tunisia, on the other hand, has witnessed a peaceful transfer of power through democratic elections, and a vibrant party system that incorporates the far-left and far-right.

What explains the divergence in outcomes between democratic transitions? What insights can be drawn and applied to future democratic transitions from the comparison of these two cases? Answers to these questions are of vital concern to policymakers who put credence in democracy promotion as a component of foreign policy. In the sections to follow, I first give a definition of democracy in order to clearly identify criteria and practices favorable to a democratic transition. Secondly, I examine existing theories of democratic transition, ranging from modernization to institutional theory. Thirdly, I compare the democratic transitions of Tunisia and Egypt in light of these existing



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theories, and develop my own explanatory model for the divergence in outcomes in Tunisia and Egypt’s democratic transitions. I argue that a further nuancing of the politico-institutional approach which incorporates an analysis of time frame and chronological ordering of democratic transition processes is the best model for understanding the Tunisian and Egyptian outcome disparity. This model allows me to draw conclusions from this particular comparison to add insight and subtlety to the field of democratic transitions in the hope that policymakers and academics alike can learn how to better respond to future comparable situations in the Middle East.

#### THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan’s book *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* provides a comprehensive definition of democratic transitions — “a democratic transition is complete when sufficient agreement has been reached about political procedures to produce an elected government, when a government comes to power that is the direct result of a free and popular vote.”<sup>5</sup> Any paper that considers the workings of democracy should abide by a concrete definition, as this will determine what constitutes a threat or aid to democracy. This paper will follow Jurgen Habermas’ formulation of deliberative democracy, the basis of which lies in “citizens’ free and equal deliberations on the laws that should govern their life together in the polity.”<sup>6</sup> This conception presents a synthesis between constitutionalism and democracy; it guards against the excesses of a majoritarian democracy, while also defending the principle that sovereignty resides in the public will. The importance of this theoretical understanding of democracy is that it includes all members within the polity in the process of deliberation, thus building consensus as to the rules of the political game. Deliberative democracy also protects against the tyranny of the majority because of its vigorous attachment to constitutionalism, human rights, and judicial independence.

This paper will examine and evaluate five theories of democratic transition, namely modernization theory, secularization theory, the elite and labor models, and the politico-institutionalist approach. It will begin with the modernization and secularization theories because they are the oldest and most prominent in the field. It will then proceed to examine the elite model, which was developed more recently in light of the Portuguese and Spanish transitions in the 1970s, as well as the labor model, which was developed in light of the second wave of African transitions in the 1990s. Finally, it will turn to the politico-institutionalist approach that provides the analytic framework with which this paper establishes its own theory of democratic transition.

Modernization theory, one of the most prominent theories of comparative politics, contends that economic development underpins democracy, by precipitating democratic transitions and solidifying the institutions of existing democracies. In his original formulation, Seymour M. Lipset argues that industrialization, urbanization, wealth, and education are the markers of economic development, which statistically correlates with democracy.<sup>7</sup> This theory has not fallen out of favor amongst academics: Adam Przeworski also argues that as countries economically develop, their social structures become increasingly complex—the bourgeois class emerges, workers organize, and civil society grows—thus making it impossible for a dictator to remain effectively in command.<sup>8</sup> This theory has faced criticism in recent years because of the persistence of economically developed authoritarian regimes like those in the Gulf States, which have extremely high indices of income per capita and yet remain under the thumb of dictatorship.<sup>9</sup> However, the existence and persistence of developed dictatorships such as the Gulf States can be explained by their extreme economic reliance on valuable resources—in this case oil and natural gas—that allow them to co-opt opposition forces, buy off the public writ large, and employ expensive secret police forces.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, authoritarian regimes receiving large sums of for-

foreign aid can use these transfer payments in a manner identical to resource-rich autocracies. These exceptions illustrate that the initial assumption that economic development and democracy are connected may be sound, but requires additional nuance to explore and specify the crux of the connection.

Other scholars, such as Ilter Turan, see secularization as a prerequisite for democracy. Secularization theory argues that members of a polity are unlikely to compromise over matters of faith, and thus it is necessary to see the political sphere as autonomous from the realm of religion in order to have a functional democracy.<sup>11</sup> The Iranian revolution and the takeover of the transition process by the radical Ayatollah Khomeini, exemplifies the concerns that fuel the argument that secularism is an absolute necessity for democracy and that Islamists are not democrats, but hijackers of would-be democratic transitions. Nevertheless, the theological underpinnings of the Ayatollah's rule are peculiar to Shia Islam and its hierarchical system, so it is unclear whether Sunni Islamists could garner the popular legitimacy to create a theocratic state in the same vein as Iran, although Saudi Arabia might beg to differ. Furthermore, viewing secularism as a unitary concept is problematic in light of the variety of existing interpretations, as illustrated by the differences between the U.S. and French conceptualizations of secularism.<sup>12</sup> Mark Lilla persuasively argues in *The Stillborn God* that secularism is a political theology in its own right that only emerged after several centuries of debate amongst thinkers of the Christian philosophical tradition, and therefore each religious tradition must establish its own interpretation that is compatible with its theological underpinnings.<sup>13</sup>

In Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter's seminal work, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*, initial elite compacts are regarded as central to democratic transitions.<sup>14</sup> While important scholarship has emphasized the role of elites, Ruth Collier and James Mahoney contend that labor movements were critical to the success of democratic transitions in Latin America and southern Europe in the 1970s and 80s.<sup>15</sup> Other scholars support this view with evidence from the "African wave" of democratization that points to the number of legally recognized labor unions as the single most important factor in explaining the variation in successful protest movements.<sup>16</sup> However, two countries with the largest numbers of legally recognized unions in the Middle East, Morocco and Algeria, have witnessed relatively fruitless and isolated protests in recent times.<sup>17</sup>

While all of the theories above are logically plausible and supported by empirical evidence in certain cases, the politico-institutional approach is a uniquely comprehensive tool for analyzing democratic transitions. This approach emphasizes the distinctive institutional heritage of a country and the complex interactions that take place between structures and political actors.<sup>18</sup> This mode of analysis is well-suited for unpacking the dynamics of democratic transitions, as it highlights how the institutions that outlive a particular dictatorship shape political actions, and how competing actors attempt to redesign the political rules in their favor. However, drawing on the Habermasian conception, democracy does not survive in an environment in which competing actors or vestigial institutions in a country attempt to alter the rules of the political game on the fly. Instead it is dialogue and consensus building amongst competing actors that determines whether or not they find an agreeable set of political rules and institutional designs. Enacting a constitution before major elections take place is therefore crucial to the success of a democratic transition, as it sets down a legally legitimate set of rules and procedures agreed upon by the political actors in the country to govern elections and institutional structures.

It is my particular contention that vestigial authoritarian institutions are a threat to democratic transitions if they are not sufficiently delegitimized by revolutionary actors, and that labor unions can function as the broad consensus builders necessary for reaching a constitutional agreement if they remain non-ideological.

#### A COMPARISON OF THE POST-REVOLUTIONARY TUNISIAN AND EGYPTIAN TRANSITIONS

This paper will examine and compare the recent democratic transitions in Tunisia and Egypt to evaluate the politico-institutionalist approach and other competing models of democratic transition noted above. Tunisia's democratic transition can be characterized as successful because the Ennahda, the Islamist party of Tunisia, and the secularist forces were able to agree upon the set of political procedures to regulate an elected government in the form of a constitution. They then conducted a free and fair election in which Beji Caid Essebsi won and his opponent conceded defeat, rather than challenging the results or resorting to violence.<sup>19</sup> This series of developments satisfies the criteria of the definition of a successful democratic transition previously given. On the other hand, Egypt's freely and

fairly elected President Mohamed Morsi was deposed by a coup d'état on July 3, 2013 and a military regime was installed in his place, thus bringing an abrupt end to the democratic phase of the Egyptian transition.<sup>20</sup> It remains an open question, however, as to whether the Egyptian military will return to the barracks and cede control of the government to civilian control, or if it will further consolidate its hold on the country in the long term.

Before proceeding with my analysis of the transitions using the politico-institutional approach, it is important to control for other potential explanatory factors, such as the neighborhood effect from the democratic domino theory, differences in levels of ethnic heterogeneity, or modernization theory's emphasis on macroeconomics.<sup>21</sup> Both of the countries are situated geographically in North Africa, and before the uprisings there was no proximate democracy to either. This negates the potential explanation that the neighborhood effect had any role in Tunisia's democratic success or Egypt's failure. Tunisia and Egypt also have mostly homogeneous Arab Sunni populations, and their demographic similarity eliminates the alternative explanation that sectarian differences doomed the Egyptian case. According to the United Nations' Human Development Index, although neither country ranks particularly high—with Tunisia sitting in 90th place and Egypt in 110th—both still have medium to high human development statistics.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, both Egypt and Tunisia maintained five to seven percent annual growth rates.<sup>23</sup> This evidence then rules out the importance of macroeconomic factors in explaining the variation in outcomes, and also underscores the need for greater nuance in modernization theory as an explanation for democratization. The politico-institutional approach is thus appropriate for analyzing the democratic transitions of Tunisia and Egypt because the secondary factors discussed above are removed from the foreground, while institutional struggles and structural transformations are placed under the spotlight.

#### AUTHORITARIAN REGIME CROSS ANALYSIS

The politico-institutional approach posits that the institutions that are left over from the authoritarian regime will structure the transition period. It is therefore important to examine the institutions that outlasted Mubarak and Ben Ali. Neither ruler relied solely on brute force to create a durable authoritarian state. In fact, they used the promise of democracy or the façade of democratic institutions to conceal their authoritarianism. In Egypt, Hosni Mubarak



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allowed the semblance of participatory politics to shield his regime from external criticism to co-opt members of the opposition, and to facilitate intramural competition amongst regime elites.<sup>24</sup> However, the 2010 parliamentary elections in Egypt exposed the farcical democratic institutions when Mubarak's National Democratic Party won 99% of the seats in a clearly rigged vote.<sup>25</sup> The Rassemblement Constitutionnel Democratique (RCD) performed a similar function for Ben Ali. The Tunisian National Assembly was filled with RCD members, with a small number of seats shared among the opposition parties as a nominal nod at multiparty politics.<sup>26</sup> In both countries, the dictators used the semblance of democracy to help legitimize their rule. The use of specious democratic institutions, such as rigged elections and parliaments, meant that the Arab Spring protesters' goal was not simply to overthrow a particular leader, but to completely reconstruct their political systems.

The police forces of Egypt and Tunisia were the main tools of repression employed by Mubarak and Ben Ali. Ben Ali was himself a former military police officer, who purposely kept his security forces powerful since he distrusted the military.<sup>27</sup> In Egypt, the police force was used not only to curb dissent, but also as “the chief administrative arm of the state, aggregating the functions of several agencies.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, in the wake of the protests, the police forces of Egypt and Tunisia became discredited institutions, as their elevated position had been based purely on loyalty to the now toppled dictator. So why is this important to the transition?

Perhaps justifying the regimes' mistrust of the military, during the protests, the Egyptian and Tunisian militaries refused to fire on protesters, defying orders from their respective dictators and thus sealing the fates of Ben Ali and Mubarak. This decision lent the militaries in both coun-

tries the protesters' goodwill and a potential role in the transition process. However, the considerable difference in the capacities of the Tunisian and the Egyptian militaries must be noted. Under Ben Ali in Tunisia, the military was professionalized, but also underfunded and under-equipped.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, the military's share of the Egyptian economy was massive under Mubarak, with estimates ranging anywhere from 5 to 40 % of the economy. This large range in estimates is due to the fact that it is illegal in Egypt to report on military holdings, and an accurate figure is thus impossible to calculate.<sup>30</sup>

The Egyptian military, under the aegis of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, sought to secure its extraordinary political and economic privileges after Mubarak's fall, which is in line with the politico-institutional theory that incumbent institutions will try to retain arbitrary discretion over rule changes in the transition period.<sup>31</sup> The military was wary of Gamal Mubarak's neo-liberal policies and concerned about him potentially succeeding his father.<sup>32</sup> This supports Shadi Hamid's contention that "Egypt's revolution, rather than representing a sharp break from the past, may be better understood as a popularly inspired military coup," in that the military acted soon after Mubarak's fall to ensure the continuity of their own institutional privileges.<sup>33</sup> It is easy to conclude that the Egyptian military's extensive power doomed the country's prospects for democracy, while the Tunisian military's impotence meant it played little to no role in the transition's outcome. This conclusion, however, lacks a causal link between powerful militaries and the failure to democratize. Looking at the Turkish case, it is clear that a powerful military can in fact encourage efforts to democratize. In the absence of such causal logic it is better to view the Egyptian military's role as structuring the process by which the transition unfolded, but by no means predetermining its outcome.

#### ANALYZING IMPORTANT POLITICAL ACTORS IN THE TRANSITIONS

Islamists scored electoral victories in Tunisia and Egypt in the uprisings' aftermath that put them in prominent positions to determine the futures of their countries. There are several reasons behind the Islamists' electoral successes. First, because the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes had historically persecuted Islamist groups as either religious radicals or terrorists, the credentials as staunch opponents of the ancient regime were unquestionable.<sup>34</sup> Second, because they are not solely political groups but also religious ones, the authoritarian states could never fully root out

these Islamist organizations lest they destroy their own Islamic credentials, thus giving Islamist opposition a developmental advantage in comparison to secular opposition groups.<sup>35</sup> Third, the institutional resources and social networks of Islamist organizations allowed them to, "channel popular discontent in politically effective ways," which aided their turnout at the ballot box.<sup>36</sup> While Secularization Theory contends that the involvement of Islamists in a democratic transition jeopardizes its success because Islamists do not accept the strict autonomy of the political sphere from the religious one, the Ennahda party of Tunisia demonstrated a remarkable commitment to the democratic transition in its handling of several major crises during the transition period.<sup>37</sup> The Tunisian case demonstrates that Islamists are not inherently undemocratic, and that the failed transition to democracy in the Egyptian case was not predetermined by the victory of an Islamist to the Egyptian Presidency.

A comparison of the role of labor unions in the Egyptian and Tunisian cases highlights qualifications to Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle's theory of democratization based on labor pluralism, instead suggesting that the goals of unions are relevant in shaping the political battles amongst revolutionary forces. Contrary to the supposition of Bratton and van de Walle's theory that democratization is based on the pluralism of recognized trade unions, the Tunisian uprising prevailed with critical support from the single legally recognized labor organization in Tunisia, the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT), and the Egyptian uprising succeeded in toppling Mubarak without significant involvement from the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF). The UGTT was critical to the success



A CHILD HOLDING A SIGN THAT SAYS, "FREE TUNISIA"  
(COURTESY OF FLICKR)

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of the protest movement in two ways. First, UGTT members framed Boazizi’s self-immolation “not as a suicide resulting from the socioeconomic misfortune of an individual, but rather as a political assassination.”<sup>38</sup> Second, their leadership was critical in expanding the protests geographically, such that the police forces were too overextended to contain or quell the protests. In Egypt, factory strikes contributed in undermining Mubarak’s regime by causing a decline in the economy, but they occurred without orders from the ETUF leadership and reflected economic demands rather than political ones.<sup>39</sup> The important contribution of the UGTT to the success of the Tunisian uprising made it a significant force in shaping the country’s political future and its demands for “political reforms...to deepen democracy” shaped the parameters in which the secularists and Islamists debated the future design of the Tunisia.<sup>40</sup> The lack of formal involvement by the ETUF meant that labor did not frame a set of political goals for other revolutionary actors and instead left the door open to the popular Islamists to decide how the country would transition from military rule.

#### CONSTITUTIONAL PROCESS AND MAJORITARIAN DEMOCRACY

Democratic transitions require tremendous feats of political maneuvering and compromise. Indeed, “a country in Tunisia’s or Egypt’s circumstances must steer between the Scylla of outsized influence by erstwhile autocratic incumbents and the Charybdis of unconstrained new actors who seek to lock in newfound power.”<sup>41</sup> However, the lack of a constitution before elections take place means that a stable consensus on the rules of the political game is not yet existent, and thus the legitimacy of the democratic project, and the checks necessary to preventing the personal consolidation of power by the next president are not yet in place, jeopardizing the country’s democratic transition.

Egypt’s transitional process exemplifies the pitfalls described here. The lack of a constitution polarized the disparate forces of the revolutionary movement at the major juncture of the democratic transition, the elections. In the

initial aftermath of Mubarak’s fall from power, the military suspended the 1971 constitution, leaving the door open for an entirely new political structure.<sup>42</sup> The military, however, moved quickly to preserve the economic and political privileges it had enjoyed under Mubarak by appointing a special committee to propose amendments to the 1971 constitution, and lay out the path to transition away from complete military oversight. This committee was composed of three Islamists, none of whom represented secularist ideas.<sup>43</sup> The committee first called for parliamentary elections that would select the 100-person constituent assembly followed by a presidential election. Because the elected president was charged with overseeing the adoption of a new constitution, he hypothetically held the power to jettison the transition process or significantly undermine its democratic procedures.<sup>44</sup> These proposals were subject to approval by popular referendum scheduled for March 19, 2011. At this critical juncture, the combined opposition of the secularists and the Islamists could have severely undermined the legitimacy of this committee and the referendum. The military could not have sustained its pledge to represent the interests of the people and act as the guardian of the revolution had it blatantly ignored outcry from both sides of the revolutionary spectrum. Additionally, a crackdown against further peaceful protests representing a united revolutionary front could have sullied the reputation of the military and “increas[ed] the internal solidarity of the resistance campaign, [and] creat[ed] dissent and conflicts among the [military]’s supporters.”<sup>45</sup>

Instead the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists, and other Islamists threw their considerable financial and organizational weight behind the constitutional amendments and the restoration of much of the 1971 constitution until the constituent assembly was formed. This decision reflected purely partisan interests and not a deliberative attitude towards democracy.<sup>46</sup> It also polarized the political spectrum, angering the liberals because two of their top presidential candidates were barred under the new selection criteria, and broke the nascent ties between the Islamists and the liberals that had developed in the revolution.<sup>47</sup> From this moment on, the liberals and the Islamists found them-

selves in a bitter political conflict over the spoils of the revolution, a conflict further enflamed by Morsi's heavy-handed tactics upon assuming the presidency and which ended only with his ouster.<sup>48</sup> This conflict was predetermined by the failure of the revolutionary movement to establish a consensus for a new constitutional system before the election of a president. Utilizing the existing constitutional framework left authoritarian levels of power in the hands of the executive and in such a setting, it is unimaginable how a constitution based on consultation and dialogue could have been written, given extreme imbalance in power between the Islamists and the liberals. The Egyptian case demonstrates that handing the keys of an authoritarian state to another man by an election does not necessarily yield democracy. Rather, it is absolutely indispensable that power-sharing structures be established before elections can ever take place.

By contrast, the constitutional process allows revolutionary actors of different strands to build trust and make concessions through dialogue and time, despite ideological disagreements over the structure of the future state and political crises. Similar to the military in the Egyptian case, the vestiges of Ben Ali's regime attempted to commandeer the revolution and reassert their privileges.<sup>49</sup> Unlike the Egyptian case, however, the secularists and Islamists remained united, participating jointly in demonstrations at the Casbah plaza to demand the ouster of interim Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, who not to be confused with the Ennahda's Rachid Ghannouchi, was a holdover from Ben Ali's ruling party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD).<sup>50</sup> This demonstration ensured the "dissolution of the RCD...[the] legalization of Ennahda, and that elections for the Constituent Assembly would be held."<sup>51</sup> The Casbah protests illustrate how the Tunisian revolutionaries' were able to achieve concrete political objectives by remaining united against the vestigial regime forces attempting to break them up.<sup>52</sup> Soon thereafter, the Islamist Ennahda party won the country's first free and fair election, sparking concerns that it would seek the spoils of political power just as the Muslim Brotherhood did in Egypt. Instead of confirming those fears, the Ennahda established a governing coalition in the Constituent Assembly and divided up leadership roles with the heads of the CPR and the Ettakatol, a power-sharing arrangement that was dubbed the Troika.<sup>53</sup> Despite the continued potential for political opportunism by the Ennahda, the party approached politics in a consultative manner, not letting divisive issues jeopardize the continuation of the talks. In an act of magnanimity, the Ennahda

made a decisive concession to the secularists with its announcement in March 2012 that the party would not insist on making Sharia *a* or *the* source of legislation.<sup>54</sup> Shortly after the counterrevolution in Egypt, though, leftist Tunisian MP Mohamed Brahmi was assassinated, which sparked a week-long protest that called for the end of the coalition government. Parallel to Egypt's transition, politically charged violence threatened the entire democratic enterprise, but thanks to dialogue between the leaders of the opposition and the Ennahda, a compromise solution was reached and the Constituent Assembly was able to resume and then complete its work.<sup>55</sup> The Tunisian Constitution contains numerous contradictions that will be open to interpretation and contestation in the years to come.<sup>56</sup> However, it is also a reflection of the emerging consensus between Ennahda and the secularists and the product of major concessions made by the Ennahda on the protection women's rights and the freedom of speech and religion.<sup>57</sup> By rejecting continuity with the authoritarian regime's institutions in favor of redesigning government, Tunisia's revolutionary forces averted the polarizing effects of presidential elections and created a constitutional structure viewed as legitimate by both sides of the political spectrum. The legitimacy of this structure was tested by the 2014 presidential elections, in which the Ennahda party candidate Moncef Marzouki portrayed opponent Essebsi's potential presidency as a reversal of the "Jasmine Revolution."<sup>58</sup> However, after the election results confirmed Essebsi's victory, Marzouki quickly conceded defeat, thus signaling that the Ennahda was accepting a transfer of power to the hands of the Nidaa Tounes and would not seek power outside of democratic means.<sup>59</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Democratic transitions occur in the aftermath of revolutions when the major political actors view democracy as the best form of governance for realizing their political objectives, but this is not enough to sustain democracy. Habermas's conception of democracy refines the understanding of what sustains and jeopardizes democracy, an important clarification when the very definition of democracy is a point of contention amongst competing political actors. While the military ended Egypt's democratic experiment and the UGTT framed the objective of Tunisia's revolution as democratic, the interests of these institutions did not predetermine the outcomes of the transitional period. Instead, the chronology in which presidential elections and the adoption of a constitution occurred contributed greatly to



the degree of polarization in the populace. This in turn affected whether political actors were willing to turn to extant institutions to facilitate a regime change away from the democratically elected administration. Egypt's failed transition to democracy illustrates how the presidential elections without constitutional reforms first taking place polarized the electorate and drove many Egyptians, who had previously called for a removal of the military from a supervisory role, to cultivate its support in toppling the newly elected president. On the other hand, Tunisian political actors made important concessions and overcame political crises during the transition period to develop a consensus and hold presidential elections because the constitutional process was deliberative and inclusive.

This paper indicates that the trust and deliberation necessary to build a functioning democracy cannot be constructed in a polarized environment, nor can it function when the rules of the political game are being decided solely by the will of the majority party. Additionally, the enormous sums of military aid that the United States gives to Arab dictatorships increase the political interests of the military, which then limit and threaten the autonomy of democratically elected civilians. If the United States is truly interested in spreading democracy to the Middle East, then it cannot continue buttressing the militaries of authoritarian regimes and preventing Islamists from taking power via elections. The Tunisian case suggests that rapprochement between secularist and Islamists is a possible and vital foundation for a future democracy. The United States should therefore not be overly wary of Islamist movements as prohibitive to democracy in the Middle East and be willing to provide sufficient economic aid to those countries transitioning to democracy. This is critical because many transitioning democracies struggle to provide their constituencies with real material gains in their first few years, which could in turn lead to counterrevolutionary movements that abruptly end the nascent democratic experiment underway.

Further research should investigate whether Tunisia's neighbor Algeria is well suited to transition to democracy. Their geographical proximity, shared ethnicity and language, and similar colonial history augurs that developments in one country will influence the other. For example, the brutal Algerian Civil War of the 1990s legitimated Ben Ali's repression of the Islamists in Tunisia, and this historical linkage suggests that future parallel democratic developments are possible. Another important topic for investigation is whether the instability that occurred in

Libya and Syria after popular protests deterred potential protest movements in other Middle Eastern countries from challenging their regimes. This could offer an additional explanation for the lack of widespread protest movements in Morocco and Algeria.

## ENDNOTES

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