

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

Citation metadata

Author: Eva Bellin
Date: Fall 2018
From: Political Science Quarterly(Vol. 133, Issue 3)
Publisher: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
Document Type: Essay
Length: 16,277 words

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...

[Access from your library](#)

This is a preview. Get the full text through your school or public library.

Source Citation

Source Citation

Bellin, Eva. "The Puzzle of Democratic Divergence in the Arab World: Theory Confronts Experience in Egypt and Tunisia."*Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 133, no. 3, 2018, p. 435+. Accessed 14 Nov. 2020.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A557024581

Explore

This is a preview. Get the full text through your school or public library.

[Access from your library](#)

Footer

- [About](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Terms of Use](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [Accessibility](#)

The Arab uprisings in Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia: Social, political and economic transformations. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Google Scholar. Tilly, C. (1979). Socioeconomic contention and post-revolutionary political change in Egypt and Tunisia: A research agenda. PRIF Working Paper 24. Frankfurt: Peace Research Institute Frankfurt. Google Scholar. De-idealizing the democratic civil peace: On the political economy of democratic stabilization and pacification in Argentina and Ecuador. *Democratization*, 16(5), 998–1026. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340903162143>. CrossRef Google Scholar. Yashar, D. J. (2005). Tunisia holds lessons both for Arab autocrats and for Western promoters of democracy. Which lessons turn out to be decisive will depend, if only in part, on whether democracy promoters demonstrate the same flexibility and responsiveness shown by Arab regimes. Authoritarian regimes in the Arab world have shown remarkable agility over the past two decades. They have absorbed and survived the shock of the political transformations of 1989, the democratization of Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Through trial and error, they have developed strategies for managing pressures for Conspiracy theories are a prevalent feature of Arab culture and politics. Prof. Matthew Gray writes they "are a common and popular phenomenon." "Conspiracism is an important phenomenon in understanding Arab Middle Eastern politics ..." Variants include conspiracies involving colonialism, Zionism, superpowers, oil, and the war on terrorism, which may be referred to as a War against Islam. Roger Cohen theorizes that the popularity of conspiracy theories in the Arab world is "the ultimate refuge of the the Arab world's 'democratic exception'. During the so-called 'Baghdad Spring' of early 2005 the Arab Middle East appeared to witness the regional reformist upheaval that neo-conservative proponents of the decision to topple Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 had prognosticated (Kagan and Kristol, 2002; Muravchik, 2002). dimensions of democratisation but also the increasing body of literature dealing with causes of authoritarian resilience in the Arab world. By the end of 2011, Tunisia had crossed the threshold of becoming an electoral democracy.² 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.