Crisis of Democratisation in the Maghreb and North Africa

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EDITORIAL

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Introduction

Democratisation in revolutionary times matters to academia and to our social world. Reflecting on the urgent scholarly need among students of Arab and Middle Eastern politics to address the crisis of democratisation is imperative. A line-up of social scientists comes together to do just that: a focused and in-depth engagement with the problematic of the crisis of democratisation. To this end, the contributors in this Special Issue offer a 'soft' theorisation of the crisis of democratisation in the context of the 'Arab Spring' and its aftermath. Such an undertaking seeks at once context-focused analysis and sensitivity to the 'specific'. That is, a set of articles that embraces multivocality of specialism, interpretation, methodology and positionality. We address the problematic by focusing on what qualifies as 'democratic backsliding,' alternatively called 'setbacks,' 'regressions,' etc. This is one means for outlining the anatomy of the Arab region's own 'democratisation crisis' over twelve years after the 'Arab Spring' uprisings that heralded cascading socio-political changes in the region, Maghreb included. What possible comparative representations can be gleaned from our attempt to deconstruct the Arab democratisation crisis? How are they manifested and experienced empirically and discursively? The articles in this Special Issue attempt to contextualise and analyse this phenomenon through diverse case studies, accounting for the social and political matrices in which democratic backsliding is incubated. In so doing, the contributors collectively bring to the fore both commonalities and particularities of Arab polities that can no longer escape the conundrum of 'reform or perish'. Against the backdrop of haunting ghosts from authoritarian pasts (presents?), the Special Issue is an attempt to study the crisis of democratisation, a confirmation that despite backsliding the imaginaries and horizons of democratic futures have not dimmed.

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Background and rationale

We observe across the Arab Maghreb (and the broader Arab Spring geography) the 'rise and demise' of democratisation, namely the inauguration of democratic reforms which are then stalled. We conceive of this phenomenon as a problematic embedded in both the academic and social worlds. To avoid 'exceptionalizing' the (sub)region, we frame the issue as part of the 'state of play' of global democratisation. Despite heavy blows and extensive setbacks since 2011, democratisation has unequivocally entered the Arab political lexicon. The horizon of popular expectations has widened as a result of the 2011 and 2019 protests and uprisings. However, democratisation's fits and starts cannot be purely a 'local' affair. Neither is it entirely 'regional' or 'global', enacted by external actors and forces. Still, at times the United States, the EU, and even international financial institutions (IFIs) have played significant roles in post-Cold War democratisation (Whitehead 2001). Eschewing binaries, we search for interplays between these three interlocking layers. Thus, the articles in this Special Issue investigate intersections where boundaries between countries, and their respective cultures and norms (democratic/civic or authoritarian), blur.

As social scientists examining changes still in the offing, we are not claiming to *forecast* future developments in this Special Issue. Instead, we are exploring the turning point or opening in the Maghreb instigated in 2011, consequential for socio-political organisation and distribution of power ever since. Hence, the Special Issue represents an attempt to stimulate discussion. The aim is neither gloomy prediction nor grim analysis. In focusing on lingering or persistent bottom-up mobilisation, we tend toward the optimistic view where potential remains for democratisation. Arab and Maghrebi publics have proved themselves to be lively, socially and politically engaged (collectivies of) people who have demonstrated interest, commitment, creativity, and sacrifice in their pursuit of freedom and dignity. Moreover, backsliding has increasingly taken place from the Americas to Asia to Eastern and Central Europe (Vachudova 2020).

In scrutinising the Maghrebi and Arab '**crisis of democratisation**', we are not suggesting that the current democratisation impasse is an instance of Huntington's 'reverse wave' (see 1991, 31–61). We resist this conception because it might be easy to speak of *protest* or *uprising* waves in 2011 (and on a smaller scale, 2019). The Arab *hirak* (anti-authoritarian popular mobilisation) spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, etc. Yet no such wave took place at the level of democratisation, where the ousting of dictators was followed by reforms. The observable 'wave' seems to have stopped at the uprisings. Hence, we seek to understand varieties of '**democratic backsliding**' in the (sub)regional crisis of democratisation. In other words, we probe the 'deterioration of qualities associated with

democratic governance' in a possibly gradual fashion (Waldner and Lust 2018, 95) within Maghrebi and North African cases. While themselves focusing on democracies, Waldner and Lust (2018) do not preclude autocracies (and presumably democratisers) from various versions of this process. They consider a given case to be a backslider when erosion is discernible in, at minimum, two of three broad indicators ('competition, participation, and accountability') related to democracy (Waldner and Lust 2018). As the Special Issue will demonstrate, this concept is salient to each of the cases under study.

Importantly for this Special Issue, we value the comparative exercise. The retrenchment of democratisation presents a diversity of experiences across the Maghreb or North Africa and the wider Arab region. Rather than putting the cart before the horse, we proceed from (empirical or discursive) experience to generate some sort of empirically informed 'soft theorising'. A novel turn of events and political developments in the region deserves such exploration. We are interested in exploring the panoply of democratic backsliding or setbacks from Morocco to Egypt. Can we characterise this backsliding as the regional flavour of a global 'autocratization' (V-Dem 2021)? Is it the triumph of electoral or procedural democracy? Or might it be the cobbling together of hybrid regimes (Diamond 2002) or competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2002)? The set of concepts available to choose from is intriguing. As part of our 'soft theorizing', the articles in this issue will test some of these concepts without being bound by them. This is one way to push the boundaries of understanding the trappings of democratisation – and their shortcomings. States and regimes can boast voters and ballot boxes, challengers and incumbents, parliaments and courts, and still fall into some level of backsliding. This puzzle encourages the attempt at understanding the thresholds at which countries might claim to reach 'sustainable democratisation', with its attendant processes, cadres, and material and ideational resources of self-reproduction.

The current democratisation impasse also comes at a time when (the prospect of) the paraphernalia of democratisation competes for attention with other 'universal goods' such as stability, development, IMF goods (Sadiki 2021), membership into NATO observer status, hosting cultural events (FIFA, expos, academic conferences), military bases, and the purchase of sophisticated weaponry in the region. The popular uprisings of the Arab Spring have been blamed for all kinds of socio-economic and political ills afflicting the Arab world, from terrorism (Schumacher and Schraeder 2021) to Europe's migration 'crisis' (Geddes and Hadj-Abdou 2018). Such charges warrant investigation, forming a kind of analytical subtext to the articles in this Special Issue. The problematic at hand, then, the crisis of democratisation in the Maghreb, is linked to three sets of events, variously relevant to each of the cases. First, counter-revolution since the 2011 (and 2019) uprisings and

revolutions (all cases); second, the breakup of states, particularly those mired in violence (e.g. Libya, and in 2023, Sudan); and third, setbacks even among states that have to an extent transcended the democratic threshold (e.g. Tunisia and outside the Maghreb, Kuwait). The specificities of how these developments feed and transform into a crisis of democratisation call for attention in the Maghrebi context.

Aims and scope

To the ends outlined above, we pose the following sets of questions to guide engagement with the Special Issue:

1. What are the norms and the counter-norms (including of elites) at logger-heads in this crisis of democratisation? How might secular and religious values speak to one another in these iterations of transformation? Can we speak of 'twin tolerations' (Stepan 2012) between religion and politics, for instance?
2. What local-global and local-regional interactions may spill into the (sub)-region's crisis of democratisation? Regionally, we can point to the absence of Arab democratic institutions that might buttress nascent democratisation; regional powers offering support tend to be autocratic (e.g. Gulf states). Internationally, security-infused dealings (Bermeo 2016, 16) with (neo)imperial powers (namely, the US) may tend to jeopardise popular democratic aspirations and elite responsiveness to them.
3. To what extent do existing socio-economic and military structures contribute to the crisis of democratisation? Skewed distributional patterns have not budged since the 2011/2019 uprisings, leaving marginalisation, deprivation, and inequality deeply entrenched. The 'deep state' through which states' military and security apparatus infiltrate governance institutions and bureaucracies similarly poses obstacles to the broader participation and increased power-sharing characteristic of democratisation.
4. What forces of resistance continue to emerge and challenge democratic setbacks and the crisis of democratisation? Some degree of bottom-up *hirak* that initiated region-wide transformation persists. These struggles (whether loosely or tightly organised) are perhaps the only opening and gateway for further change. Yet, the events of 2011/2019 have shown that ousted regimes are no guarantee for (democratic) transition.
5. Flowing from the above questions, what patterns can we glean in the Maghreb and North Africa's crisis of democratisation? Are the democratic setbacks a harbinger for long-term, permanent reversals, given that some counter-revolutionary forces seem to be endorsed by (members of) the global community (e.g. Egypt's Sisi, or outside the Maghreb, infectious normalisation with Syria's Assad, or American allies at war in Yemen?

The cases and contributions

The goal of this Special Issue is to move beyond (positivist) imperatives of generalisability. Instead, we are interested in the specifics and empirics of each case study. The (democratic) political future is uncertain in all of the cases at hand. Yet each of them features bottom-up outbursts of popular resistance and *hirak*. The various contributions to the article employ an array of theoretical frameworks and methodologies. We view the resulting eclecticism as a strength of this Special Issue that includes empirically-informed theorisation (from qualitative interviews to statistical regression analysis) as well as narrative-based accounts leading to more Grounded Theory-type analysis.

Sadiki and Saleh open up the issue in a critical re-reading of transitology and 'reverse transitology' theories of democratisation and democratic back-sliding, respectively. Conceptualising a 'degeneration of democratisation' in North Africa, they argue for contextualised, historicised, and localised analysis of democratisation's challenges. A learning/unlearning framework is one way forward in what they envision as a 'critical democratisation' research agenda that places emancipation upfront. They emphasise attention to the construction of the *demos* in studying North African and Arab democratisation elicited by revolution and popular uprisings. The Special Issue then moves to the empirical investigations. From a foreign policy angle, Sara Yerkes examines US democracy promotion and assistance to the countries of the Maghreb from the George W. Bush to the Biden administrations. She suggests that the US has done too little to bolster the democratic change inaugurated by the 2011 uprisings and thereafter. Despite democracy promotion being central to US national security interests, the US's problems with its own democracy, as well as its aid 'without teeth' as she puts it, have ultimately been unsuccessful, in part contributing to backsliding in the region. **Morocco**'s king has engineered (surface) reforms since protests erupted in 2011. However, reforms including a new constitution and elections have not much changed the balance of power in which he is more or less the singular power holder. Attending to citizens' rights through an institutional lens, Silvia Colombo illustrates how democratisation has stalled in the country over the past decade.

As in Algeria, **Sudan**'s President Omar Al-Bashir relinquished power following a 2019 popular uprising eight years into the Arab Spring. The ruling transitional council has been tilted in favour of the military, which consolidated its stronghold over the new ruling coalition in the fall 2021 coup. Drawing on interviews with youth activists in Sudan, Linda Bishai strikes a cautiously hopeful note. She explores the 'democratic power' of the Resistance Committees that stand out even when confronting the military's return, noting a qualitative change in civil society that can facilitate democratisation. **Libya**

has been steeped in civil war since its revolution deposed (and killed) Muammar Gaddafi with NATO reinforcement in 2011. The December 2021 elections planned through international conferences did not proceed as planned, and competing power claims are ongoing. Yasmina Abouzzohour and Tarik Yousef analyse public opinion data from the Arab Barometer to explore how trust in the military impacts the challenges for the country's democratisation, once promising when the revolution broke out in 2011. Aisha Kadaoui explores **Morocco's** authoritarianism with a focus on the country's historical and cultural-political specificities. She demonstrates how the traditions and constitutional architecture keeping the monarchy in place have in fact been used to control the pace and form of political reform for decades. Rather than democratising, Moroccan reform has been the pretext for solidifying authoritarian rule.

Algeria's President Bouteflika stepped down after the 2019 *hirak* protest movement. The current President Tebboune hails from the ancien régime and, despite elections, represents authoritarian continuity with military rule. Ilhem Rachidi and Abdallah Aballagh's article, based on extensive interviews with activists, spotlights the intense state repression faced by the *hirak*. Fragmentation within the movement has effectively resulted in a kind of democratic paralysis in the country. **Egypt** is a case of a traditional military coup in which Abdelfattah Sisi, in addition to striking in 2013 to remove a democratically elected president, has killed, jailed, and outlawed the opposition. Since then, Western powers in addition to those in the region have come to terms with the putsch, with few signs that Sisi is poised to liberalise. Shimaa ElSharkawy points to the confluence of external and internal factors that worked *against* democratisation since 2013, namely limited space for civil society to organise and socio-economic hardships deepened by COVID-19 and even the war in Ukraine. Moncef Khaddar examines **Tunisia**, the clearest case of very recent reversal. Until 2021, it had gone the furthest regionally in democratic institution-building, with elections in 2011, 2014, 2018, and 2019, and a democratic constitution in 2014. President Kais Saied's power grab in July 2021 has called into question the viability of the country's decade of democratic gains. Khaddar highlights the enduring socio-political problems Tunisians face, questioning whether the 2011 revolution or the 2021 disruption rose to the level of popular expectations of democracy. Finally, Haifa Souilmi explores **Tunisia's** current democratic setbacks from another stance. Her ethnographic investigation of a small rural village in the country reveals how citizen attitudes and political orientations have transformed from democratic support and participation to widespread approval of President Saied's populism. All that is democratic is not lost however: Tunisians are still inclined to be critical of the president and his performance.

Taken together, the articles in this Special Issue suggest the dynamism of democratisation and its setbacks in North Africa and the Maghreb. These interventions are an initial exploration of the complex dynamics unfolding across countries still in transition since the first cries for freedom and dignity in Tunisia over twelve years ago. We hope they illustrate a conviction that despite – perhaps *because of* –its manifold problems, democratisation remains a pressing and important topic for interdisciplinary social science research.

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