

**Putting Institutions into Perspective:
Two Waves of Authoritarianism Studies and the Arab Spring**

Kevin Koehler and Jana Warkotsch

Department of Political and Social Sciences

European University Institute

Florence, Italy¹

kevin.koehler@eui.eu

jana.warkotsch@eui.eu

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The mass protests that shook the Arab world in late 2010 and early 2011 not only took observers by surprise, but also challenged long-held assumptions within the academic community.¹ After all, the study of Middle Eastern authoritarianism in recent years had mainly focused on explaining why Arab political regimes had been so remarkably (and maybe, one might add in hindsight, superficially) durable and resilient.² The events thus ushered in a period of self-reflection for many scholars of Middle Eastern politics and authoritarian rule more generally.³ Plagued by the questions of why we have been unable to foresee events of such magnitude, it is tempting to proclaim the failure of authoritarianism studies and to turn to other fields for conceptual salvation.

We want to take this chance to take stock of the subfield. The aim is to draw some conceptual lessons by confronting evidence from the Arab Spring with what we think is a rich tradition of theorizing on nondemocratic forms of political rule. Although not as systematic and comprehensive as democratic theory, the subfield of authoritarianism studies produced important debates of its own and goes significantly beyond explaining the absence of democracy. We hold that, while the subfield is clearly challenged by the Arab Spring, we should make sure not to throw the baby out with the bath water and carefully examine which theoretical lesson this challenge actually holds.

Our argument proceeds as follows. In the next section, we outline our empirical evidence in broad brushes, concentrating on different regime trajectories in the Arab Spring and formulate what we think is the challenge to the conceptual state of the art contained in these events. The main part of this article then turns to a review of the vast literature on authoritarian rule. We summarize the main strands of this literature, focusing on two distinct waves of authoritarianism studies and putting the debates and approaches into the context of larger conceptual developments in Comparative Politics. In the last section we finally confront the evidence with the theory and offer some conclusions as to the degree to which our failure to predict the Arab Spring can

actually be construed as a failure of authoritarianism studies. In a nutshell, we argue that although the main findings of the stability debate that dominated recent research on authoritarian regimes are actually not refuted (and even partially supported) by the events, the subfield nevertheless would do well in going beyond the rather narrow institutionalist focus of recent years and back to some of the concerns dealt with in older works in the field. This would enable scholars to put institutional factors into perspective and to inquire into the circumstances under which institutions arise and affect behavior.⁴ This can be seen as one of the main conceptual desiderata in post-Arab Spring authoritarianism studies.

The Arab Spring: Failure of Authoritarianism Studies?

The Arab Spring saw mass protests erupt in many countries across the region. This fact alone can count as the biggest surprise of all. While protest politics are by no means a completely new phenomenon in the MENA,⁵ what was new about these protests was their mass character: People went to the streets by the thousands and transcended social and political divisions in the process. This enormous mobilization was unprecedented. Protestors broke down social and geographical barriers that had heretofore prevented the emergence of a mass based challenge, and the protests significantly drew on social groups that had historically been considered the bases of the respective regimes.⁶ The Arab Spring thus, above all, marks a crisis of legitimacy of (some) authoritarian regimes in the MENA and six regimes experienced massive crises as a result of mass uprisings

Secondly, we observe significant variation in the group of countries that experienced major regime crises as a result of mass-based popular protests. Although the movements in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen share a number of common characteristics such as the relative preponderance of youthful actors, the distinctive combination of political and social concerns, and the fact that they all

lacked central leadership, they also exhibited a whole list of features that were particular to their respective political context.⁷ Given our theoretical aim, however, treating mass protest as a common factor allows us to focus directly on regime aspects and thus on variables that are immediately relevant to conceptual debates on authoritarian rule.

And there is significant regime-level variation: Approximately two years into the uprising the chief executive changed in only four countries (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen), while in the other two (Bahrain and Syria) the respective chief executive remains in office; in only two cases (Egypt and Tunisia) moreover could large-scale violence be avoided, while the other four at least temporarily descended into civil-war-like scenarios; in two of the six cases (Bahrain and Libya), finally, external military intervention significantly shaped the course of events, while the other four remained free of such outside interference. We will thus mostly limit ourselves to considering the four cases without overt outside intervention, namely Egypt, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen.

In these four countries furthermore, on a more nuanced level, the dynamics of the uprisings themselves differed, as did the degree to which they resulted in the re-configuration of power relations and the rise of previously excluded groups into the political elite. In Tunisia, President Ben Ali left the country after only about a month of protests that had progressed without major counter-mobilization. Previously excluded (or at best tolerated) groups now are the main actors on the political scene: The Islamist Hizb al-Nahdha (Renaissance Party) entered into a coalition with two smaller secular parties and the resulting 'troika' shares responsibilities in the transition government. At the same time, a new constitution is being prepared by an inclusive constituent assembly containing a broad array of political forces.

In Egypt, President Mubarak was pushed out of office by the military 18 days into the uprising and, as in Tunisia, there was no sustained counter-mobilization. While the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the Salafist Hizb al-Nour (Party of Light)

meant major changes, the military – a core sector of the old regime elite – still wields considerable power. Parliament was dissolved not even half a year after its first session, and the constituent assembly is dominated by Islamist groups. With political processes mainly determined by the balance of power between the MB and the military, the degree of inclusiveness and institutionalization of Egypt’s transitional order is decidedly more limited than that of Tunisia.

Further towards the pole of continuity of ruling arrangements, in Yemen there was a protracted process of mobilization and counter-mobilization that quickly turned into violent conflict. Only in November 2011, nine months into the Yemeni uprising, did we see a transition of power from long-serving President Ali Abdallah Salih to his former Vice-President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. This transition, moreover, signified the reconfiguration of intra-elite alignments rather than the inclusion of new groups, with Salih and his family remaining in the country and retaining some political offices. The original protest movement had been marginalized early on in the process when the Islah Party (Reform Party), an opposition political party with strong roots in the Yemeni tribal elite, entered the fray in March 2011. The militarization of the uprising following major military defections a month later further contributed to pushing the youth-based protest movement aside. The dynamics of the transition period are thus determined by the interaction of tribal and military elites who had been part and parcel of the old regime coalition and previously excluded actors remain spectators to the process.

In Syria, finally, the civil war into which the uprising turned lasts for more than one and a half years, without any significant prospects for a political solution (Landis 2012). Table 1 summarizes these differences.

Table 1: Variation in Regime Trajectories: Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Yemen

Country	Change in	Counter-	New Actors
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	Chief Executive?	mobilization?	Included?	
Tunisia	Yes	Minimal	Previously excluded Islamist and secularist opposition	↑ Increasing Continuity ↓
Egypt	Yes	Minimal	MB and broader Islamist movement	
Yemen	Yes	Yes	None	
Syria	No	Yes	None	

Drawing on the differences described above, there are thus three large questions: (1) Why did some countries in the MENA develop crises of legitimacy that allowed formerly isolated and relatively contained protest movements to coalesce into a cross-class coalition that challenged the regime, while in other cases similar movements remained largely contained and isolated?⁸ (2) Why did political elites in some of the cases of mass uprising immediately defect from the regime prompting the implosion of regime institutions, while in other cases there was significant counter-mobilization eventually culminating in the use of military force? And lastly, (3) why do preliminary outcomes in terms of post-uprising elite alignments show such different patterns in terms of inclusiveness?

It is these questions that challenge the state of the art in authoritarianism studies. Before we can detail this challenge the next sections present an overview of the most important debates and issues in this research tradition: Authoritarianism studies developed in two distinct waves. One of the most fundamental differences between these two waves is the degree to which they take into account factors transcending more strictly institutional aspects of political regimes. Whereas the first wave of the 1960s and 1970s analyzed nondemocratic political orders primarily in their interaction with broader socio-economic conditions, second-wave approaches from the late 1990s

onwards mainly restricted their analyses to features of the political regime proper and tended to focus on formal institutional structures. In the next sections, we provide a schematic (and necessarily incomplete) overview of some central contributions to both debates that together constitute the state of the art in conceptual thinking about authoritarian rule. In the penultimate section we finally return to the question of regime trajectories in the Arab Spring and link it to some of the major hypothesis drawn from the two waves of authoritarianism studies that we are about to review. The last section concludes with some broad lessons.

Political Order, Development, and Authoritarian Rule: First-Wave Approaches to Authoritarianism

In order to understand the emergence of first-wave approaches to the study of authoritarianism, it is helpful to locate them within the broader development of Comparative Politics. Developing mainly from the 1960s onwards, first-wave scholarship was deeply embedded in the dominant paradigm of that time – modernization theory⁹ – which arguably shaped the discipline in conceptual as well as methodological regards. First-wave approaches generally remained tied to this conceptual tradition, even though many authors more or less strongly rejected some of its theoretical assumptions.

According to classical modernization theory, the ‘traditional’ societies of the developing world were expected to gradually develop more complex and differentiated economic and social structures in a process of modernization that would ultimately result in the emergence of ‘modern’ political system modeled after the Western example. The original impetus behind models of modernization and political development was thus to understand political processes in the rapidly expanding universe of independent countries of the 1950s and 1960s by focusing on how they tackled the supposedly universal challenges and crises of modernization and political

development. While the exact relationship between economic and political development remained disputed, in modernization theory's earliest formulations, economic modernization was expected to result in political development, and – in a best case scenario – in the establishment of a democratic regime.¹⁰ With modernization the prospects of economic wealth and political stability appeared on the horizon of underdeveloped nations that could, it was hoped, draw on the earlier experiences of modernization in the west and thus avoid some of the more painful by-products of the process. However, the effects of modernization on traditional societies were not uniformly positive, entailing significant dangers and challenges to the societies undergoing modernization at the same time. Thus, increasing levels of economic development, industrialization, the expansion of education and social mobility, the emergence of new social roles, urbanization, and associated processes would ultimately, it was assumed, lead to attitudinal and behavioral changes that were bound to exert adaptive pressures on the political system. This, it was feared, could create a gap between demands for participation and a modernizing political system's capacity to institutionally channel such demands, which in turn would stall or entirely endanger the modernization process itself. Hence, especially later modernization theorists turned away from their initial optimism for democracy in these societies and emphasized the danger that mass involvement would pose for political stability, often going as far as viewing authoritarian methods of rule as necessary intermediate stages in a larger process of development.¹¹

It is these concerns that gave rise to the first wave of authoritarianism studies. The bureaucratic-authoritarian military regimes of Latin America were interpreted as emerging from the challenges of capitalist deepening at relatively advanced levels of modernization,¹² while single party regimes were presented as political elites' attempts to overcome problems of national integration and nation-building.¹³ In brief, the centralization of political authority in the hands of elites and the suppression of demands for (immediate) participation were seen as the result of and to some extent

necessary for achieving specific developmental goals. We now turn to the literature on military and single-party regimes, respectively, to illustrate this general pattern.

Military Authoritarianism

Whereas modernization-theoretic background assumptions figured centrally in works on military authoritarianism in terms of the connection they establish between economic development and political outcomes, key authors differ on what stage of development is most likely to give rise to military regimes.¹⁴ Whereas for authors such as S.E. Finer and Amos Perlmutter, it is low development that facilitates military rule, in Guillermo O'Donnell's notion of bureaucratic-authoritarianism challenges occurring at medium levels of development give rise to military regimes.

These scholars are united, however, in that they explicitly turned against the idea of a uniformly positive relationship between modernization and democracy inherent in earlier formulations of modernization theory. Focusing on the development of bureaucratic-authoritarianism in Argentina and Brazil, O'Donnell for example argues that the process of industrialization in these countries led to an increase in the size of the urbanized labor force. As a result of these developments, more social sectors became politically activated, putting increasing demands on the political system. With growth unsustainable over the long run, developmental bottlenecks occurred that reduced the performance of earlier populist regimes and led to gaps between demands and performance.¹⁵ Efforts to minimize this gap, along with the multiplication of political forces as a result of deepening social differentiation, created new and sharpened existing conflicts over the distribution of economic and political power, while diminishing the problem solving capabilities of the existing regime.¹⁶ The result was 'mass praetorianism,' providing the stage for the take-over of the military. The bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes emerging from military intervention and combining military elites with foreign educated managers and technocrats attempted

to solve these structural problems by excluding the working classes and bringing order to a divisive political environment.¹⁷

O'Donnell's famous conception exemplifies the idea of first-wave conceptions of military rule that the military intervenes in societies shaped by overt political conflict and mobilization. The armed forces are perceived – by their societies and sometimes by scholars alike – as an organization superiorly positioned to deal with the modernizing challenges their countries face. It is thus not surprising that, in addition to reshaping their respective systems, the regimes that resulted from military rule more often than not had a highly exclusionary character, aiming at demobilizing their societies rather than allowing them a role in pushing forward the national project.

Single-Party Regimes and National Integration

The conditions that led to the emergence of the second major type of modern authoritarian regimes as seen by the first-wave literature, namely single-party rule, differed from that leading to military intervention. As Samuel Huntington observed, single-party regimes “are always the product of nationalist or revolutionary movements from below which had to fight for power.”¹⁸ The classical literature on single-party rule is thus concerned with the post-independence development of new states emerging from colonialism and focuses on the role of dominant political parties in the processes of nation building and national integration.¹⁹

Juan Linz consequently discusses this form of authoritarianism under the title of “post-independence mobilizational authoritarian regimes.”²⁰ In such regimes, historically mainly located in post-independence Africa,²¹ the period of colonialism had destroyed traditional structures of political domination and led to the emergence of a nationalist movement under the leadership of mainly Western-educated elites. Facing little developed societies with low levels of national integration, in many cases these movements transformed into dominant or single parties once independence had

been achieved. This process is often attributed to the overwhelming economic strain, the difficulties of a nation-building project in poorly integrated societies, or perceived threats from mounting opposition.²²

The process of “Creating Political Order” by transforming a nationalist movement first into a dominant and then into a single party was aptly described by Aristide R. Zolberg for five West African cases. Tracing the emergence of unitary ideologies as well as single-party structures in Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, and Senegal, he analyzes the emergence of single parties as well as the characteristics of the resulting regimes. Having achieved national independence, African leaders faced a nation building project in economically poor and socially weakly integrated societies, the sheer magnitude of which, according to Zolberg, often resulted in the installation of a “one-party ideology” by revolutionary leaders turned rulers that defined opposition as illegitimate.²³

It is doubtful, however, to what an extent many of the African cases discussed in this context ever reached a level of organization that justifies speaking of “mass parties.”²⁴ Thus, as Zolberg acknowledges, “the West-African party-states approximate Weber’s patrimonial type in many important respects. The relationships between the ruling group and their followers are indeed based on personal loyalty.”²⁵ In the next section, we turn to more explicitly consider this type of political rule that has been classified as pre-modern by much of the literature based on the premises of modernization theory and thus in important respects begins to transcend this theoretical framework.

Neopatrimonialism and Personalist Rule

The first author to comprehensively discuss personalism in modern contexts (and on whose work Linz largely bases his own account) was Guenther Roth. In Roth’s understanding, personalism or patrimonialism refer to “a typology of beliefs and organizational practices that can be found at any point of [...] a continuum [of

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political regimes, the authors],”²⁶ and does not describe a specific type of political rule. Samuel Eisenstadt,²⁷ and following him scholars such as Jean-François Médard,²⁸ Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg,²⁹ Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle³⁰ and Peter Pawelka³¹ by contrast, describe what they refer to as modern neo-patrimonial or personalist rule as a specific form of (modern) authoritarian regimes that is highly centralized in the sense that access to power and resources is concentrated at the center in the hands of political elites that are loyal to the person of the ruler. The basis of regime maintenance in such orders is the distribution of resources, rewards and access to spoils.

As was the case with the previous subtypes, the concept entails some critical distance towards modernization theory. Thus, while under the assumptions of modernization theory, clientelist or patrimonial patterns of behavior were relegated to the realm of ‘pre-modern’ politics, the term ‘modern neo-patrimonialism’ first introduced by Eisenstadt in 1973 (himself a prominent modernization theorist) emphasized the fact that some modern political systems seemed to combine legal-rational and patrimonial forms of domination.³² In African studies, the concept of neopatrimonialism “became the orthodoxy of the 1970s and early 1980s,”³³ but the notion was also widely employed in the Middle East and North Africa,³⁴ as well as for a number of regimes outside of these regions.³⁵ In most conceptions, the notion not only describes a political regime, but at the same time connotes relatively low state capacities with political control being mostly exercised indirectly via cooptation and clientelism, but with repression remaining an option of last resort. As Médard succinctly put it, under neopatrimonial conditions, “the problem is not development, but the maintenance of order and survival. All the energy of the rulers goes into more or less successful efforts to stay in power.”³⁶

The debate on personalist rule is certainly farthest removed from the focus on socio-economic conditions characteristic of first-wave scholarship, although the prevalence of neopatrimonial structures is linked to economic underdevelopment. The informal

political processes on which this perspective focuses, however, also play an important role in the second-wave debates on the so called gray zone. Overall, the first-wave literature on authoritarian rule strove to understand the origins of specific forms of authoritarian rule in terms of the socio-economic conditions at the start of the modernization process as in the case of personalist rule, or in the nature and consequences of the process itself, as in the case of military and single party rule. However, while such studies focused on a broader array of factors within individual countries, there was hardly any comparative effort to delineate differences not just between countries, but rather between different types of authoritarian rule. In terms of the question of how to properly classify authoritarian regimes, efforts largely proceeded inductively, implicitly based on the theoretical question of who holds power, but without attempts to outline the general features of authoritarian regimes and then classify its subtypes along generally identified dimensions. This problem would preoccupy analysts in the second wave of authoritarianism studies.

Post-Democratization Debates and the Second Wave of Authoritarianism Studies

Several developments came together by the end of the 1980s to give rise to what we call the second wave of authoritarianism studies. Empirically, in the wake of the third wave of democratization,³⁷ many nations seemed to take the road of democratization but frequently developed into something that might at best be called incomplete democracies, rather than full-fledged liberal democratic regimes. However flawed these new ‘democracies’ were, the global political changes of the third wave resulted in renewed interest in the conditions under and processes by which authoritarian regimes embarked on democratization. What Thomas Carothers called the ‘transition paradigm’³⁸ became the dominant theoretical lens in the study of authoritarian rule. Under the impression of the successful democratization processes in Southern Europe and Latin America, the conceptual tools developed in this context³⁹ were applied on a

global scale and produced numerous studies on the progress of and obstacles to democratization in other regions.⁴⁰

Despite the initially positive outlook it soon became clear that democratization was not on the agenda in large parts of the world and that the 'End of History' (Fukuyama 1992) was not forthcoming. This realization spawned a series of new debates on the conceptual level. Scholars began to develop new classificatory tools to deal with the allegedly novel (or hybrid) nature of a number of post-third wave regimes, ranging from so called 'adjective democracies' to 'hybrid regimes' and 'new authoritarianisms.'⁴¹

Theoretically, the gradual demise of modernization theory's grand theorizing which sought to identify general pathways from tradition to modernity largely independent of specific historical contexts ushered in a phase in which the so called 'new institutionalisms' put an explicit focus on the way in which political institutions shaped actors' behavior. Thus, while in the immediate tail waters of modernization theory authoritarianism studies had emerged as a more distinct field of study within Comparative Politics, due to the specific logic of the approach, area study perspectives dominated the subfield. This was to change with the arrival of the second wave of authoritarianism studies which sought to identify the mechanisms in which transitions from authoritarian rule proceeded via the mediating factors of formal political institutions within more broadly comparative cross-national research designs often based on quantitative data.

These changes must again be understood against the background of general developments in the discipline. By the late 1970s and more pronouncedly from the 1980s onwards, the behaviorist focus on explaining macro level outcomes as aggregates of individual level choices and modernization theory's focus on grand theorizing were challenged on theoretical grounds. Whereas modernization theory sought to find similarities in the transition processes of developing countries on their way to modernity, other approaches started to explicitly focus on differences and tried

to trace them back to the institutional design of different polities.⁴² Hence, a number of approaches subsumed under the headline of the ‘new institutionalisms’ developed and would set the tone from there on: “These new institutionalists shared the behavioralists’ concern for building theory. However, by focusing on intermediate institutions, they sought to explain systematic differences across countries that previous theories had obscured.”⁴³

The focus on institutional factors combined with an emphasis on cross-national comparison on the basis of quantitative indicators would thus come to be one of the defining features of second-wave studies on authoritarianism. Whereas the first wave mostly sidestepped the question of systematic regime classification, the cross-national comparative focus of second-wave studies presupposed the construction of typological systems able to capture relevant differences.

From Adjective Democracies to New Authoritarianisms: The Gray Zone Debate

The first reaction to the ‘Eddies in the Third Wave’⁴⁴ that became apparent in the second half of the 1990s was the development of so called adjective democracies. The debate on adjective democracies is part of the transition and consolidation debates and grew out of the empirical observation that some regimes, even though they might have acquired the form of democracies, continued to lack its substance. As David Collier and Steven Levitsky observed in their seminal 1997 article,⁴⁵ this empirical phenomenon led to the proliferation of diminished subtypes of democracy in the literature. Concepts such as ‘illiberal democracy,’ ‘defective democracy,’ or ‘delegative democracy,’⁴⁶ all have one fundamental point in common in that they serve to highlight a specific regime’s democratic deficits by adding a negative adjective that signals in which area the respective regime fails to reach democratic standards. In general, the characteristic feature of adjective democracies is the existence of formally democratic institutions that are prevented from working

‘properly’ by informal institutions and processes. In the context of adjective democracies, moreover, these democratic deficits tended to be interpreted as consolidation challenges, rather than permanent features of alternative regime types, thus establishing an implicit expectation that these regimes will eventually develop into complete liberal democracies.

Partly in opposition to this teleological bias, the discussion on ‘hybrid regimes’ conceptualized regimes in the ‘gray zone’ between democracy and authoritarianism as mixed regimes that combine elements of both fundamental types, rather than being simply ‘on the way’ towards consolidated democracy.⁴⁷ Although the insistence that such forms of political rule are potentially stable rather than yet-to-be-consolidated democracies represents an important step, there are also some interesting similarities between this debate and the debate on adjective democracies. The most important of these similarities in the given context is the role of formal institutions. Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way for example, initially defined their concept of ‘competitive authoritarianism’ as a hybrid regime in which “formal democratic institutions are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority,” although “[i]ncumbents violate those rules so often and to such an extent [...] that the regime fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy.”⁴⁸ Thus, what distinguishes hybrid regimes from adjective democracies (if anything) is the extent of violations of formal democratic rules, rather than any qualitative differences. In other words, it is the extent to which the existing rules are observed by the actors (a question of regime consolidation), rather than the rules themselves (a question of regime type) that distinguishes hybrid regimes from adjective democracies.

The last step in the classification debate has been taken by theorists of so called ‘new authoritarianisms,’ with the ‘electoral authoritarian’ type being the most widely used variant. Electoral authoritarian regimes, to use Andreas Schedler’s characterization, are “regimes in which opposition parties lose elections.”⁴⁹ The difference between electoral authoritarian and hybrid regimes thus again mainly lies in the extent to

which the formal political arena is controlled by the authoritarian incumbents and reflects Barbara Geddes' warning that "most authoritarian governments that hold elections are not hybrids but simply successful, well institutionalized authoritarian regimes."⁵⁰ In contrast to both, adjective democracies and hybrid regimes, new authoritarianisms are clearly located within the classical three fold typology of political regimes. They constitute subtypes of authoritarian regimes that allow for some degree of political participation, without, however, crossing the threshold to meaningful political contestation.

The three conceptual perspectives outlined above cover different parts of an underlying continuum in terms of the degree to which formal, 'democratic' rules effectively structure political processes. Whereas in adjective democracies, formal institutions provide the main rules of the game but are circumvented by important actors in specific fields (such as the rule of law in illiberal democracies or horizontal accountability in delegative democracies), the same rules are violated systematically in different variants of hybrid regimes without, however, completely eliminating formal political competition; in different types of new authoritarianism, finally, the formal rules are violated to such an extent as to preclude effective contestation for power through formal channels.

There are several ways to critically engage with this second-wave literature. One of them is empirical, showing how existing authoritarian regimes deviate from the theoretical expectations expressed in such conceptual systems. This route has been taken by scholars working in the context of authoritarian institutionalism.⁵¹ The main conclusion from these debates is that the effects of different authoritarian institutions should be understood in careful empirical analyses, rather than conceptually presupposed. The second way is more fundamental in that it addresses logical problems created by the attempt to conceptualize regime types by relying on continuous scales, rather than discrete criteria. We briefly discuss both strands of

conceptual development in the next sections, starting with problems of concept formation and then turning to the more empirically oriented stability debate.

Concept Formation, Institutions, and the Continuum Problem

The fact that conceptualization strategies in the gray zone debate relied on the idea of an underlying continuum of political regimes not only produced empirically doubtful results that are difficult to operationalize, but is logically inconsistent with the notion of regime typologies containing qualitatively different regimes. We call this problem the continuum problem. Before we can develop this argument in more detail, we have to briefly take a step back and ask a more fundamental question: Why do we need concepts in the first place? What is their function in the research process?

There seems to be a consensus in the literature that concept formation necessarily has to be the first step in any (social) scientific endeavor.⁵² The fundamental epistemological reason for this is that there are a potentially unlimited number of similarities and differences between any two objects.⁵³ Since this is the case, there is at least one perspective under which any two objects can be considered the same.⁵⁴ Concept formation solves this problem. In an effort to provide “conceptual containers,”⁵⁵ the process of concept formation forces us to “take a position”⁵⁶ and to single out a dimension which we consider essential in a given context, thus establishing a system of similarity and dissimilarity relations among the objects concerned. Only once we have decided under which perspective we compare two objects can we decide if they are different or the same; and only once we answered the ‘what-is’ question can we approach the ‘how-much’ question.⁵⁷ Or, to put it in Giovanni Sartori’s words, “[we] cannot measure unless we know first what it is we are measuring.”⁵⁸

This last point is especially important in our context since it is linked to a debate between proponents of dichotomous regime measures and advocates of continuous

scales.⁵⁹ With regard to this debate, two things are noticeable. First, the view that any concept could be of an “inherently continuous nature”⁶⁰ – as is sometimes argued for the case of democracy – misses the important point that if we conceptualize a concept as continuous, this is a theoretical choice that cannot be justified with reference to the ‘real’ concept being continuous.⁶¹

Secondly, it is important to keep in mind the distinction between conceptualization on the one hand, and operationalization and measurement on the other. While the usefulness of operationalizing the features of a certain regime type in a continuous manner depends on the specific research question being asked, on the level of conceptualization the notion of continuous regime types is indeed “confused.”⁶² Either we can order all existing regimes on a single continuous scale, or there are different regime types.

If we look at recent conceptual discussions in the field of authoritarianism studies from such a perspective, a number of problems on different levels emerge. As we have alluded to above, the different expressions of the gray zone debate, namely adjective democracies, hybrid regimes, and new authoritarianisms all rely on the idea of an underlying regime continuum, with liberal democracy on the one end, and fully closed autocracies on the other. In between these two poles there are a number of different regime types that are conceived of as neither fully democratic, nor completely authoritarian, but exhibit qualities of both regime types to varying degrees. Whether this continuum is expressed in terms of degrees of democracy, competitiveness, civil liberties and political rights, or some other concept does not matter for the given context. The fundamental idea remains that of a continuum on which all political regimes can be projected.⁶³

As Axel Hadenius and Jan Teorell observe, however, “[i]f the degree of competitiveness were the only dimension along which authoritarian regimes differed, we would need no regime typology.”⁶⁴ Conceptually, the gray zone debate thus boils down to a very simple alternative: Either we want to work with regime types, or we

want to establish some kind of regime continuum. On a logical level, the attempt to use the degree to which nondemocratic regimes are structured by quasi-democratic institutions that dominated the gray zone debate thus runs into considerable difficulties. At the same time, the supposed ‘democraticness’ of formal institutions under authoritarian rule gave rise to a current of ‘authoritarian institutionalist’⁶⁵ arguments that revolved mainly about the problem of explaining regime stability.

How Do “Institutions Matter?” – The Stability Debate

Starting in the early 2000s, scholars increasingly turned away from the idea of formal institutions as liberalizing features and started to examine the extent to which such institutions could perform distinctly authoritarian functions and thus contribute to the stability of authoritarian regimes. Two interrelated trends combined to refocus the academic debate. On the one hand, starting in the second half of the 1990s, the rational choice variant of neo-institutionalism began to be employed more explicitly as the theoretical backdrop of work on authoritarian politics.⁶⁶ Building on the work of Gordon Tullock,⁶⁷ scholars such as Robert Wintrobe,⁶⁸ Stephen Haber,⁶⁹ or Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson,⁷⁰ developed general formal theories of authoritarian rule, mostly focusing on the various ways in which dictators cope with threats emanating from either political elites or from society. Whereas most of these models were too general in nature to be immediately applicable to empirical research, they were arguably influential in helping to give rise to what can now be considered a formal current within the literature on authoritarian rule that recognizes formal institutions as an important part of authoritarian regimes.⁷¹

The second factor that led to a re-appreciation of the role of formal institutions as authoritarian institutions came from a more empirically oriented perspective informed by detailed case studies. Building on earlier work in the Comparative Politics and area studies literature,⁷² scholars re-examined the role of “imitative institutions”⁷³ in the

field of incumbent-opposition relations, arguing that the existence of opposition actors can have functional aspects for dictators and that dictators use formal institutions to structure their political systems through inclusion and exclusion.⁷⁴ Others focused on formal institutions such as elections and legislatures that were interpreted as mechanisms of co-optation and the distribution of spoils,⁷⁵ or analyzed the role of ruling parties in stabilizing elite coalitions in authoritarian contexts.⁷⁶

The main conclusion emerging from this focus on authoritarian institution is succinctly summarized by Ellen Lust-Okar who maintains that “formal institutions matter in authoritarian regimes” although “[t]hey do so independently of the larger ‘rules of the game’ that characterize ‘regime types.’”⁷⁷ In the meantime, the debate on authoritarian institutions and regime stability has crystallized around two main sub-debates. The first of these debates focuses on the dynamics of authoritarian elections,⁷⁸ whereas the second mainly analyzes the role of dominant or single parties in the context of authoritarian rule.⁷⁹

The stability debate that dominated pre-Arab Spring work on the MENA and authoritarian rule more generally must thus be understood as a conceptual reaction to transitology and the gray zone debate: Give the optimistic expectation that specific institutions (political parties, parliaments, and elections) would, over the long run, contribute to the democratization of political regimes or constituted features of liberalization in their own right, the stability debate pointed out that there were strong theoretical and empirical reasons to doubt such a causal connection. While this remains an important contribution, the subfield failed to emancipate itself from its predecessors and to develop larger conceptual ideas similar to the first wave of authoritarianism studies.

One of the most striking features of the overall debate is the gap between first- and second-wave scholarship on authoritarian rule: While classical conceptions of authoritarian rule were primarily interested in the socio-economic conditions leading to different forms of authoritarian regimes, more recent work tends to adopt an

institutionalist focus in accordance with the general neo-institutionalist turn in Comparative Politics. At the same time, first-wave scholarship mainly analyzed the emergence of authoritarian rule, whereas the second-wave of authoritarianism studies inherited a focus on regime breakdown and stability from the democratization debate, but largely neglected questions of the emergence and embeddedness of institutions.

Authoritarianism Studies and the Arab Spring: What Lessons?

As the preceding review demonstrated, recent conceptually oriented scholarship on authoritarian regimes was overwhelmingly institutionalist and oriented towards accounting for the stability of such political orders. Since parties, elections, and parliaments were in the center of the democratization literature on the MENA,⁸⁰ it is not surprising that much ink was spilled on how these very same institution contributed to the stability of authoritarian rule in the region, rather than undermining it. Seen from this perspective, the events of the Arab Spring paradoxically corroborate the major findings of the stability debate: Those formal opposition parties that were said to support authoritarianism before the uprisings were conspicuous only by their absence from and hesitancy to support the protests; in general, and contrary to some of the electoral revolutions in Eastern Europe and Central Asia,⁸¹ the arena of formal electoral politics hardly played a role the Middle Eastern cases, speaking to the extent to which electoral politics was indeed controlled by the incumbents. This is good and bad news for the subfield at the same time: Good news because it means that the main hypotheses derived from authoritarian institutionalism remain valid; bad news because they just do not concern those factors that proved most important.

This point is most obvious if we return to the first challenge formulated above: Why did we see protest coalescing into mass uprisings based on cross-class coalitions in some cases but not in others? While the area specialist literature cannot be faulted for overlooking protest politics in general,⁸² there is little by way of conceptually oriented

contributions that would allow us to integrate street politics into larger debates on authoritarian rule. We simply know too little theoretically about how the conditions of protest mobilization vary from democratic to nondemocratic conditions and under different forms of authoritarian rule to make sense of the variation in protest intensity we can observe in the Arab Spring. This is an effect of the top-down, elite-centered nature of authoritarian institutionalism that focused on a part of the political system that remained far removed from the lives of most ordinary citizens in the MENA. The first theoretical lesson is thus, in very general terms, to encourage a return to approaches that takes ‘the people’ (as in the non-elites) seriously, be it as protestors, supporters, or voters.

Focusing on the second question the evidence is more mixed. There are some hints in the institutionalist state of the art that can help us make sense of the immediate behavior of political elites in reaction to the mass uprisings. Here the debate on hegemonic parties and their role in ensuring elite stability⁸³ is especially pertinent since Egypt, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen all relied on the institutional structures of a political party for upholding elite loyalty. In this sense, they all fall into the category of one-party regimes as elaborated by Ruth Kricheli and Beatriz Magaloni.⁸⁴ Although the presence of such a party should increase elites’ incentives to remain loyal to the regime by promising future payoffs, Jay Ulfelder has demonstrated that party-based regimes are particularly vulnerable to breakdown in the wake of mass protests.⁸⁵ These two apparently contradictory theoretical expectations can be easily reconciled: Hegemonic parties can only credibly promise future inclusion and thus increase incentives for loyalty as long as their hold on power is secured; once this hold on power becomes doubtful, political elites will face powerful incentives to withdraw from active support so as to not end up on the wrong side of history. Regime-threatening mass uprisings arguably can have this effect, so that we would expect to see a cascading dynamic of elite defections in our four party-based cases.

As we already described above, we observe rapid defection and party implosion in Egypt and Tunisia, while we find elite retrenchment and counter-mobilization in Syria and Yemen. At this point, an institutionalist explanation for elite behavior based on the role of the party as a mechanism establishing ‘credible commitments’ runs into major difficulties. Even if we take into account the additional factor of party strength as proposed by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way,⁸⁶ the institutionalist explanation for elite defection cannot be salvaged. Political elites defected from a relatively strong party in Tunisia and from a decidedly weaker one in Egypt; at the same time Yemeni elites remained loyal to a weak party and Syrian elite actors stuck to a strong organization. The empirical evidence here thus seems to suggest that the presence and strength of ruling parties has not been a decisive factor in regime trajectories, but that other regime institutions – notably the armed forces⁸⁷ – deserve more systematic attention.

Turning to the third question of the reconfiguration of elite alliances, we encounter a more fundamental problem. As discussed above, second-wave scholarship was mainly preoccupied with the effects of institutions on elite behavior. What we are witnessing in the post-uprising cases of the Arab Spring, however, is very much the opposite process: the reconfiguration of elite alliances that probably will, over the long run, lead to the emergence of new institutional configurations that reflect the new or re-established elite consensus. This, quite clearly, is a question of the emergence of political regimes that has been prominent in first-wave accounts, but has since lost its appeal and was replaced by a focus on regime effects. Both the first-wave literature and the transition and consolidation debates hold some promise as starting points for establishing conceptual ideas on the emergence of new regimes in the MENA, but fresh conceptual efforts will be needed to make sense of post-uprising trajectories.

Conclusions

What, hence, remains of authoritarianism studies in the wake of the Arab Spring ? On a superficial level, the events since early 2011 have at least partially cast doubt on how far reaching the explanatory power of the so called stability paradigm in authoritarianism studies on the MENA region really is. Upon closer inspection, however, the common assertion that Middle East scholarship mistakenly focused on regime stability and thus failed to predict the revolutions – while certainly true in some respect – fails to fully grasp the significance of the events for the theoretical assumptions of the field. As we tried to show in this article, the stability debate in the MENA and beyond was not necessarily wrong in its predictions, but simply took a part for the whole, inferring from the correctly predicted inability of the political opposition to mount challenges against their authoritarian counterparts to the stability of the broader regime.

This focus on the institutional characteristics of the regimes in question was a reaction to transitology's focus on the democratizing potential of formal institutions which for more than a decade constituted the cornerstone of the academic debate on regimes outside of the democratic realm. This focus was, on the one hand, questionable from a methodological point of view as it undermined the basis for building typologies in the first place by drawing on criteria for regime classification that explicitly did not impact what was to be classified to begin with. From an empirical perspective, as the events of the Arab Spring have shown, it led to a truncated view on authoritarianism that left out most of the interaction between state and society that turned out to be crucial.

Thus, not only has the Arab spring challenged the tools we used to look at authoritarianism, and the factors we have so far privileged in understanding the workings and classifying different forms of authoritarian rule, but its elite and institutional bias has ignored 'the masses,' i.e. the broader socio-structural alignments outside of elite circles and formal institutions, the ways in which regimes interact with their society, and methods used to maintain power not just amongst elites but towards

the people they rule. It is at this point where a look backwards will enable authoritarianism studies to move forward and where first wave scholarship will reveal ways to broaden the perspective of scholars studying not just the events of the Arab spring themselves, but authoritarianism more generally. The first-wave literature maintained that large-scale socio-structural alignments were conducive to the rise of certain kinds of authoritarian rule. The Arab Spring presents an opportunity to study how such factors conditioned the ways in which power was executed and maintained, and which changes in patterns of elite-mass interaction produced the crises of political institutions of which the Arab Spring is an expression.

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