Two Different Paths Toward Democracy in Egypt and Tunisia

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Abstrak


Kata kunci: Revolusi Arab, Demokrasi, Militer, Masyarakat Sipil

Introduction

Shortly after the assassination of one of the prominent opposition leaders, Chokri Belaid, leader of Unified Democratic Nationalist party, in February 2013, many scholars started questioning the future of democracy in Tunisia. Meanwhile, the consolidation process in Egypt also has been at a crossroad. This crossroad is due to the fate of the country is at the stake of possibility for the military to return to office. This intention was seen since the military toppled the democratically elected president Mohhammed Morsii in July 2013. However, in this paper, I will not focus on the consolidation process after both countries ousted their authoritarian regimes as well as held their first fair general election. Instead, it is noteworthy to look at the path toward democracy in these two countries at the center of the Arab Spring wave that started in early 2011. On the one hand, the democratic transition process in Tunisia went smoothly after introducing a national consensus between the actors, most prominently the Islamic group, Enhada, and the secular groups. In
this regard, these actors played decisive roles in building the first stage toward democracy. On the other hand, the Egyptian people faced the problem of fragmentation among the actors that finally led to the first democratic election of a president. The question is why the democratic process led to different outcomes in Egypt and Tunisia. The further analysis should address the role of the various actors in shaping the democratic discourses within these two countries. As mentioned below, there are three different actors who took responsibility during the initial process of the democratic transition in both countries.

This paper uses principal-agent relationship theory to highlight the role of the military as a state institution responding to the public reality during the Arab Spring. This theory draws upon the basic conception of agency approach proposed by Barry Mitnich in 1974 that depicted how the agent is formed by the institutions that surround it. Mitnich examined the relationship between agents in the regulatory bureaucracy and their political principal. Mitnich’s framework includes a typology of agency relationships generated from such dimensions as the level of consent between agent and principal regarding the agent’s actions, the source of specification of the agent’s acts, and the level of discretion possessed by the agent. Agents could be motivated by the public interest or by their own narrow interest. The latter interest can be derived from their organizational principles. This theory posits a dynamic process of interaction between principals and agents which develops through time. This process results in goal conflicts between the agent and its principal, and eventually this conflict will lead to different viewpoints of the crisis. However, Mitnich did not present a cause and effect explanation of this conflict. Terry Moe, in contrast, argues that in fact the agency finds itself surrounded by multiple principals: various authorizing and appropriations committees in distinct agencies, such as the executive body, legislative body, and several departmental units. As these principals compete for influence over the agency, it is forced to make compromises and trade-offs favoring some principals over others. Additionally, the agency, acting in its own self-interest, is attracted to strategies that play principals off against one another. These are casual factor
that lead to the destruction of public institutions as well as public trust. From the conflict certain crucial decisions will emerge to solve internal problems, and it will strongly lead to a separation between agent and principal based on their respective internal interests.

In Egypt and Tunisia, the military as an agent were in confrontation with the regimes which were their principals to deal with public revolt throughout their countries. The military in Egypt was partly disappointed with the performance of Mubarak’s regime. Though, since the building of the modern military institution by Kemal Attaturk, these two parties have virtually never conflicted with each other. However, at the end of his tenure, Mubarak ordered the military to stabilize the national condition, but the military eventually rejected those ordered and deserted in favor of the civilian popular mass.

Similarly, the Tunisian military fortified the civilian protests to overthrow the regime because the military was apparently unwilling to violate their institutional principle as the professional military. They were not a military politics during Ben Ali’s tenure, so once the protests erupted they refused to protect and maintain his regime. In both countries the principals absolutely failed to get prominent support from their agents to stand behind them and protect the regimes.

Methodology

This article exerts a reading-based methodology as a guidance to build an analytical thinking. The reading-based method draws many collected data, including books, journals, magazines, and newspaper articles. The aim of this methodology is to frame the paper’s inquiry based on case selection, namely in Tunisia and Egypt in their early process of democratic transition.

Questioning Democracy in Arab Spring

The “wave of democratization” refers to a group of transitions from non-democratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that period and also involve liberalization of political systems. Now, let’s take a look
at what happened in the Arab region in 2011. When the “third wave” swept many regions in the 1970s and 1980s, the Middle East remained the only region that preserved authoritarianism. Arab countries did not undergo the third wave of democratization. Huntington, as a leading scholar of the wave of democratization, excluded the Arab region. He proposes the main obstacle of democracy is Islam which is not compatible with democracy; thus Arab countries where Islam is a majority religion are automatically incompatible with democracy. But, that explanation does not apply to the Arab Spring in early 2011.

The year 2011 marked an important phase in the Arab world. The two Arab countries, Tunisia and Egypt, moved toward democracy. Tunisia started the transition period in March 2011, after overthrowing longtime President Zine El Abidin Ben Ali, eventually leading to a thorough democratization of the country and to free and democratic elections. Tunisians have established the coalition of the Islamist Ennahda Movement with the center-left party Congress for the Republic and the left-leaning Ettakatol party as junior partners. Egyptians, inspired by the successful uprising in Tunisia, demanded the resignation of authoritarian president Hosni Mubarak. After the people revolted for 18 days, Hosni Mubarak was ousted from office and a new Egypt was started under the elected President, Mohammed Morsi. In both countries, the military played a pivotal role in overthrowing the regime.

Military Decision

The Arab Spring has different features from other democratization processes that have occurred in many regions. The important story of Arab revolts during 2011 was not about Islam but the characteristic of the Arab countries. As we saw, the six Arab-majority states where considerable bloodshed took place were ruled by authoritarian regimes, particularly sultanistic regimes: Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. Aside from the tiny island kingdom of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, each of these countries was or is ruled by a sultanistic regime under the sway of a despot bound by no apparent term limits: Hosni Mubarak, Muammar Qadafi, Bashar al-Assad, Zine al-Abidine
Ben Ali, and Ali Abdullah Saleh, respectively. These regimes ruled their countries by using the military to control and support the government for decades. All the regimes highly depend on the loyalty of the security apparatus, particularly the military.

Furthermore, the specific role of the military related with mass protesters in Arab countries, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, led to democracy. I argue that the main reason why Tunisia and Egypt could move toward democracy, while others in the region did not is that the military, as the coercive apparatus in these two countries, has decided not to use its capacity and will to crush reform initiatives undertaken by the people. The key factor was the military in both countries decided not to shoot the people at that time. No matter the dynamics within the society are, the capacity and will of the military apply as the two keys in determining whether democratic process occurred or not. As Eva Bellin states, what distinguished the Middle East was not the absence of democratic prerequisites but rather the presence of conditions that fostered robust authoritarianism, specifically, the presence of an exceptionally muscular coercive apparatus endowed with both the capacity and will to repress democratic initiatives originating from society. In Bahrain, by contrast, the military stood by the ruling monarchy. Because it repressed civilian demonstrators brutally, the Bahraini monarchy survived. In Libya, the military split with some officers refusing to fire on civilians, others willing to shoot in defense of Muammar Gaddafi. The result was civil war. In Syria, the story is still unfolding, the military have managed to hold together the regime and continued to repress.

Democratic transition can be carried out successfully only when the coercive apparatus lacks the will or capacity to crush it. Where the coercive apparatus remains intact and opposed to political reform, democratic transition will not occur. As Eva Bellin has pointed out, the capacity and will to repress accounted for the region’s exceptional resistance to getting swept up in the third wave of democratization.

The capacity of the military is determined by the fiscal health of the coercive apparatus and the successful maintenance of international support.
networks. Otherwise, the will of the coercive apparatus relates with the level of institutionalization of the coercive apparatus and the level of popular mobilization. Let us analyze what factors determined the military not to shoot the people both in Egypt and Tunisia according to the variables that are crucial to this decision.

In Egypt for years, the Egyptian Armed Forces never had a problem related with the military budget. Instead, the military as a type of the entrepreneurial model on civil-military relations, owns a massive segment of Egypt’s economy. Moreover, the Egyptian Armed Forces also has close ties to the United States for years. The United States has provided Egypt with conditional military aid for the past 30 years of around $1.3 billion annually (Said 2011, 4). On the one hand it is a corporatist institution that is not only entrenched in the economy (contributing 25-40% of GDP) but more dangerously, such economic power is translated into a social base of support. Egypt military expresses a corporatist institution feature that is not only entrenched in the economy (contributing 25-40% of GDP) but more dangerously, such economic power is translated into a social base of support. We should be looking deeply at the fact that the 400,000 military professionals and their families which can be estimated at 2 million Egyptians are direct beneficiaries of the military entrenchment. Moreover, the military establishment remains a black box with no clear information about its personnel, budget, activities, or apparatuses. Finally, as a post-colonial state and one that shares direct borders with Israel, the military establishment can and does use the broad undefined concept of ‘national security’ to justify coercive and corporatist practices.

Likewise in Egypt, the Tunisia’s army was known as a professional army. They have sufficient military budget for meeting their needs. Although their duty was only on border defense, the Tunisia’s army has a sufficient military equipment or capacity to repress the people in crucial period. With their huge budget, sufficient military equipment, and international support, the military in both countries has more chance to shoot people, but they did not. They do not have will to shoot a large number of people.
Shooting on civilians is potentially costly for the military. The military has the institutional interest as described by Bellin, such as to maintain internal cohesion, discipline, and morale within the corps; protect the image, prestige, and national legitimacy of the military; and secure the economic interest. The decision not to shoot people implies in three counts.

First, shooting people can spell serious damage to the military’s core institutional interest. Shooting civilians can be a threat to the image and prestige of the military. Second, using lethal force against civilians threatens to undermine the image of the military as defender of the nation and also the image of a professional military. The army in both Egypt and Tunisia are relatively professional. They are not serving as the personal instrument of the ruler. The military in Egypt was not linked by blood or ethnicity to Hosni Mubarak and his family. Tunisia’s army had never even attempted a coup, had never taken part in making political decisions, had never been a “nation-building” instrument, and had never joined in economic-development schemes. The military in these countries has received training in the United States, where some were exposed to programs on the principles of civil-military relations under democracy. Shooting people is against the principle of the professional military both in Egypt and Tunisia. Third, in securing the economic interest, the military, especially in Egypt, realized that the people did not demand to end the military domination in the national economy. The military conceded to the revolution only on the conditions that it let them keep their economic empire thus they joined and supported the mass protesters to end the regime of Hosni Mubarak.

The loss of institutionalized forces can lead to a split or dissolution in the face of popular protest. In both Libya and Yemen, where the military was led by and served as the personal instruments of the ruler and his family, that force has split and dissolved in the face of people’s protest. In sum, they decided to shoot people and brought about massive chaos in their countries. In Bahrain, the military is not driven by the institutional base but by patrimonial claim. The Sunni-led security force stood their ground against demonstrators to preserve the Sunni Monarchy. As a result, the path to democracy is still very difficult.
The Military, The Political Society, and The Civil Society

However, the transition and consolidation of democracy in Egypt and Tunisia generated different results. Egyptians and Tunisians have held national elections for choosing the new president. Nevertheless, only in Tunisia the newly democratic system has been established and stabilized. In Egypt there still remained problems about democratic transition, such as the willing of the military to transfer power to civilians fully and stabilizing conditions after mass protesters. After entering the transition period there were massive protests against the newly elected president Mohammad Morsi. There are three sets of explanations for these different results. First is the role of the military in both countries. In Egypt the military did not want to transfer power to the civilian government. In Tunisia, by contrast, the military has decided to support the people to build a new democratic system after the uprising. Second is the trust among the actors within the state to form a new democratic system. It effects the consolidation or the fragmentation among the actors, particularly the military, the political society and the civilian society. In Egypt, the actors have fragmented. In contrast, the actors in Tunisia have consolidated.

One of the main problems during democracy transition and consolidation period relates to the role of the military. At the end of any authoritarian regime the main problem of the incoming government is managing the relation between the civilians and the military. According to these analyses, in the transition and consolidation period of democracy, the people will face major problems as to how to control and redirect the military. Moreover, the military often continues to represent a critical component in politics by offering, implicitly or otherwise, a threatening alternative to democracy.

These analyses are united by their prescription that the next step in developing and consolidating the new democratic system deals with the coercive apparatus of an old regime, particularly the authoritarian regime. The military in Egypt and Tunisia were at the core of the coercive state apparatus during the authoritarian regime; thus they were the legacy of the old regime. After the collapse of the old regime, the question is whether or not the military is willing to transfer power to a civilian government. In Egypt the answer was apparently
not at all, particularly during the democratic period. However, the military in Tunisia was willing to give power to the civilian government. As a result, Tunisia has succeeded in passing through the democratic transition period and going on to the period of consolidating democracy.

The military in Egypt has long been deeply involved in the political life of the state. Personal politicization done by former Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser to entangle the military as a crucial foundation in building modern Egypt gave a significant effect to the military to develop its political ambition that finally became largely obvious when they overthrew the longtime ruler Husni Mubarak in 2011.

Once the military has been given a political role, it is hard to push them back to the barracks and establish civilian control over them. In Egypt, the military is still playing its pivotal role even after the old regime has collapsed. The military’s full withdrawal from politics is hard to imagine given the weight of tradition, the interests that the army feels it has at stake (something can loss), and the absence from the scene of any cluster of political forces capable of both preventing disorder and governing in a manner acceptable to the high command.

In the early months after the revolution, the SCAF declared the complementary constitution that returned itself all legislative powers and gave itself a veto over a wide range of political and security issues. That constitution gave large powers to the military to control the country. It caused instability in the states after the uprising. The new constitution was a shelter of the military against the desire of the people to end the legacy of the old regime, particularly the military. Given that privileged position, it would be hard to form a supreme civilian control of the military. Without civilian control over the military, it is hard to establish democracy as “the only game in town”. In sum, the military still provides a threat to democracy not only during the democratic transition period, but also for consolidating democracy.

In contrast, Tunisia’s army was well known for having a professional army which was small and removed from politics. Particularly in the decision making processes, it had never been a “nation-building” instrument and also had never joined in economic-development schemes. Tunisia’s army has never
related to the two traditional interests of the military, namely political interest and economic interest. Given these conditions, it was easy to build the new democratic system. Tunisia’s army was willing to transfer power to the civilian government as long as the uprising ended.

The trust as mentioned by Alfred Stepan also plays as one of the determinant factors in building democracy in both Egypt and Tunisia. In Tunisia the political societies have consolidated in establishing the new democratic system. This unity of the political system is one of the keys to democratic transition, because their task is constructing democracy.

There was a consensus among the political actors to build a new democratic system based not on religious values but on democratic values. They have worked to overcome their mutual fears and distrust by crafting agreements and credible guarantees in political society. That consensus implies two objectives: the separation of state from religion and most importantly, the building of democratic principles within the state and the society. Given that consensus, the religious parties, such as Enhada, and also secular parties, such as Ettakatol want to build a civic state based on democratic principles. Secularist and Islamist parties agreed to set a religious pluralism regime, aimed at protecting the freedom of the people to express their religion values within the democratic framework. These two actors agreed to manage other issues related to the newly democratic government. All the actors, including the military, agreed with that consensus. Trust is the core of building democracy. With this trust, the political society in Tunisia displayed remarkable unity. Without trust, the modern state based on democratic values cannot be established.

In Egypt, there was no trust among the actors; all the actors distrusted each other. There was fragmentation among the political societies. Islamist parties, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, afraid of the secular parties, made a deal with the military. Fearing Islamist parties, secular parties made a deal with the military as well. Given that condition, the military played a clever game to divide political society. On the other side, the civilian groups were angered with the political society and also the military. They believed those groups were
trying to take their own benefits during the transition period. As a result, the political society, civil society and the military remain remarkably fragmented.

For these two reasons, the result of uprising in Egypt and Tunisia were different. On the one hand, Tunisia has been able to undergo the process of democratic transition and begin consolidating democracy. On the other hand, Egyptians are still trying to find their own path toward democracy.

**Conclusion**

In my analysis, to understand the democratic process in Arab countries, we have to address the role of the actors in those countries. The actors are the key to seeing the causes that drive the democratic process, particularly the military, the political society and also the civil society. The relations among these actors have determined the result of the entirely process of the Arab uprising. By examining the role of each actor, we can provide a broader perspective on how the democratic process leads to different outcomes of government.

Portraying the agency-based approach does not mean the elimination of the influence of structural conditions within the state, such as the economy, international factors, and the ideological perspectives in the states. Ultimately, such structural conditions have to be executed by those actors within the state. The decisive roles played by those actors depict how the national dynamic relies on the actors.

The three major players left standing after the last of those three officers (former Air Force general Mubarak) fell—the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), and secular liberals—would have lost much of their legitimacy, and many of their followers, had they failed to embrace central democratic tenets such as reasonably competitive elections for the key offices of state.

Yet the generals, the Brotherhood, and the liberals all wanted to protect themselves in certain areas by placing limits on the right of democratic institutions to make public policy. Soon after Mubarak’s fall, many of the young secular liberals who had filled Tahrir Square began to argue that the MB was so
strong and so fundamentally undemocratic that core liberal-democratic values could only be saved if secular liberals cut a deal with a nondemocratic source of power—the military. Many liberals argued that the military should help structure, or even write, the constitution before elections for the Constituent Assembly, or at the very least appoint a committee of experts to draft the constitution so that the Brotherhood could not constitute a majority.

For its part, the SCAF supported the holding of elections and implicitly agreed, at a price, to maintain some controls on any Islamist majority that elections might produce. Only weeks before the 26 November 2011 parliamentary elections, the SCAF released the infamous “Silmi Document” asserting a variety of military prerogatives not found in any democracy.

The Muslim Brothers, meanwhile, partly because they felt under attack from secular liberals, began early on to enter into understandings with the military. In keeping with these, the MB backed the generals’ unilateral decision to hold a constitutional referendum on the heels of Mubarak’s resignation, and kept silent about several incidents during the last three months of 2011 in which soldiers and police killed protesters, including at least 28 Coptic Christians. In return, the Brother were allowed to take a historic step by assuming partial leadership of a controlled democracy.

More than is commonly understood, the cost of the Brotherhood’s gains (which included the elected presidency of Egypt) included a special position for the military in the new constitutional order, the economy, and regional government. The new constitution, largely written by the MB, stipulates a number of arrangements not normally found in democratic constitutions.

The leaders of the Enhada party which was at one time close to the Muslim Brotherhood, since the early 1980s increasingly came to resemble Indonesia’s major Islamic groups in arguing that democracy was not only acceptable, but necessary. This eventually facilitated collaboration between Ennahda’s Islamists and secular liberals from other parties in joint efforts against Ben Ali.

Additionally, due to highly innovative “pacts” formed between secularists and Islamists before the transition started, there was a kind of
inoculation against the intense fear of democracy’s consequences that drives hybrid authoritarianism. Each of Tunisia’s two secular authoritarian presidents, Habib Bourguiba and later Ben Ali, deliberately mobilized fear. Each claimed repeatedly that allowing competitive elections would bring to power Islamists who would be at best overly tradition-bound and at worst “terrorists.” Domestic peace, women’s rights, and secular liberals would suffer. Tunisians heard a great deal of this, but despite it, leading secular liberals began to ask whether they might have more in common with at least some Islamists than with Ben Ali, and the two groups considered (with some success) whether they could work together. Suspicions remain, of course, but most secular liberals do not fear Ennahda badly enough to want to use authoritarianism as a shield against it.

Moreover, in Tunisia by contrast to Egypt, not only civil society but political society began to develop. Civil society can play a vital role in the destruction of an authoritarian regime, but for the construction of a democracy, one needs a political society. In other words, there must be organized groups of political activists who can not only rally resistance to dictatorship, but also talk among themselves about how they can overcome their mutual fear and craft the “rules of the game” for a democratic alternative.

Although Egypt arguably had a more creative civil society than did Tunisia, the former’s specifically political society was and is woefully underdeveloped. As late as four months after Mubarak’s February 2011 ouster, the two key social groups that had opposed him—secular liberals and the Muslim Brotherhood—still had not held a single joint meeting to discuss democratic governing alternatives. The Brotherhood’s website was still displaying its 2007 draft party platform, complete with nondemocratic features such as a rejection of the idea that a woman or a non-Muslim (two groups comprising more than half the populace) could ever be president of Egypt, and a recommendation that a high court composed of and appointed by imams should be empowered to review all new legislation to ensure its compliance with shari’a. Small wonder, then, that a sense of growing distrust has continued to dominate the political atmosphere in Egypt.
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