

Elite Choices, Path Dependency and the Arab Spring

Written by Akis Kalaitzidis

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AKIS KALAITZIDIS, MAY 20 2019

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In December 2010, a young man named Mohamed Bouazizi was ticketed for selling fresh produce in the town of Sidi Bouzid. Unemployed and desperate, the man set himself on fire and subsequently unleashed a wave of events that came to be known as the 'Arab Spring' (BBC 2013). An entire horde of politicians, journalists and academics have since that day attempted to make sense of events and explain their significance for everyone on this globe but most importantly for the people living in affected countries. Despite their best efforts, answers remain elusive because of the variation among cases and lack of general theory that explains the behaviour of a significant number of cases, i.e. in at least four cases, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen there was a change in government, in many more countries there was not; in several cases, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, there is civil war while in many more despite the intensity of protests there has been limited violence and the protests have since slowed down. It has been relatively difficult to explain the variations despite the cultural and political similarities in the countries affected.

This paper is going to explore the richness of the research that has already been done on those areas, from Pareto, Mosca, and Michels to Dahl, Skocpol, and Linz, to circumscribe the theoretical landscape in which modern day political forces in Arab countries where the revolutionary Arab Spring swept political institutions operated. What were the main institutional relationships that have been challenged during these revolts? The answer to this question will hopefully provide the researcher with a theoretical landscape within which citizens, political activists, and institutions interacted to bring about diverse results in policymaking in the different countries.

It is the main contention of this work that despite the universality of elite theory descriptions and predictions, the set of political solutions to all socio-political actors in any of the Arab Spring countries will certainly be affected by the existing institutional setup and the historical development of said institutions. Based on the works of North, Pierson, Ruth, and David Collier, I argue that revolutionary movements are rarely spontaneous and despite the claim that social revolutions tend to re-draw the political, but most importantly, the social map of the country they occur in, the outcomes of said social revolts depend on pre-revolutionary institutional structures and cultural affinities.

In addition to the study of the critical junctures that led to and defined the Arab Spring, this paper will consider the relationship of elites to non-elites during the turbulent times and the exogenous factors that limit the policy options Arab Spring countries faced. Does this relationship of elites to non-elites define the policy options countries in revolt faced regarding their political future? Did exogenous factors matter? If yes, how much? What do the results of these interactions reveal regarding the options elites themselves had during the Arab Spring of 2011–2012?

Finally, the paper will conclude with a brief episodic comparison of the 'Autumn of Nations' which occurred with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the Arab Spring, which we hope will highlight the strengths of elite theory analysis and will also create additional significant questions both in terms of methodology but also in terms of the usefulness of social revolutions as unique empirical case studies.

Defining 'Elites'

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A commonly accepted definition of modern elites is the following: 'An élite is a selected and small group of citizens and/or organisations that controls a large amount of power'. Based on the social distinction regarding other groups of lower strata (Daloz 2010), most of these selected groups are constantly seeking differentiation, as well as separation from the rest of society (Vergara 2013). This distinction of groupings of people in society, so well-illustrated in Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Bourdieu 1979), assumes that social class plays a tremendous role in defining aspects of the individual life to such an extent as to define the self. Vergara argues 'social class plays a significant role in the construction of a personal identity (i.e. a person's interests). Thus, as social classes are in permanent interaction during the daily life, several "social differences" are reinforced' (Bottomore 2013, 241). But how does this translate into concrete choices and actions of political consequence? Action thus becomes the central tenant of such theories because absent political action, any explanation would be void of meaning. Elite theory has grappled with this question for a long time. Classical Sociologists such as Mosca and Michels have long argued that first elites are superior intellectually and are thus very influential in public life while they are also as inevitable as an 'Iron Law' (Vergara 2013, 34). Michels, in one of the most influential books in social science research of the twentieth century, argued that organisations (in his case political parties) are necessarily run by smaller, highly efficient and salient groups called elites and that most organisations formed in democratic society will inevitably turn out these groups which he describes as oligarchic, thus stating that 'Historical evolution mocks all the prophylactic measures that have been adopted for the prevention of oligarchy' (Michels 1962). One then is compelled to ask whether a reaction to such tendency is as inevitable as the Iron Law, and whether the Arab Spring is such an expression of the public will against Arab elitism.

Elite theory, then, attempts to describe this relationship between the groups which are described as elite and their interaction with the masses as well as their relationship to power because if their distinction in society is meant to be meaningful it must involve a measure of power upon those who do not belong to the group itself. Why? Because as Vergara argues 'the possession of multiple forms of capital (social, cultural, economic, politic, among others) allows elites to ensure their social reproduction as well as the cultural reproduction of the ruling class' (Vergara 2013). Starting with Schattschneider and Mills who argued that, first, the pluralist system upon which democracy is based is flawed and is being manipulated by a rather small group of people and that it is generally led by well-established elites who have important and established roles in society such as the military, politicians, bureaucrats, and the business elite (Mills 1956). In his critique, E.E. Schattschneider famously noted: 'The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent' (Schattschneider 1960). One could argue that the flaws in American democracy may not be so different from the flaws in other democracies or for that matter in non-democracies. The one significant question thus in democracies and non-democracies alike is Who Governs? According to most of the theorists cited, governance is akin to political party representation and political parties are run by smaller groups of competing elites. But in non-democracies this does not apply and elites are established socio-political entities that rule over the people instead of ruling for the people. These elites do not live to serve the people in any meaningful capacity but rather they exist parasitically and 'from' the people. According to Schmitter, this feature could be a result of the professionalisation of politics in highly advanced democracies in which professional politicians exist in most important institutions of society, from the parliament to the military to the economy (Schmitter, 1991). In non-democratic regimes, these elites are equally as important if not more important given the latest research on democratisation.

Democratisation as a Process

Transitions to democratic rule have interested researchers since the beginning of the twentieth century but came under intense scrutiny at the time of what was termed the 'Third Wave' of democratisation, which started with the return to democracy in Southern Europe with the Carnation Revolution of Portugal, the death of Francisco Franco in Spain, and the collapse of the Greek junta in 1974 after losing half of Cyprus to the invading Turks (Huntington 1991). Much of the discussion naturally included Southern Europe and its regional peculiarities, as well as Latin America, which was going through some increasingly brutal and declining dictatorships (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). As the wave gained strength, the research became increasingly unable to explain the differences in the democratisation process of each country, which until then only included two modes – gradual reform from monarchic rule or revolution and destruction of the previous system, something Schmitter terms the English and French ways (Schmitter and Lynn 1991). Until the Arab Spring, the theory did not explain the reality of transitions accurately and

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most transitions did not fit either model.

Linz and Stepan, in a very influential argument, detailed the requirements for a successful transition to democracy, i.e. the rules, the institutional structure, and the regulations that needed social and political approval (Linz and Stepan 1996). Thus, elites became key in the explanation of how the transition would happen and what kind of results would be yielded. Several countries for example started witnessing hybrid regimes in which by giving up some of the more egregious violations of freedom a country made strong steps towards democratisation but the process was never completed. One such example is Turkey which made significant democratic concessions to its people, including holding elections and mostly eliminating unlawful imprisonment and torture, but never really completed the process of transition only to slide backwards (Akyol 2015). Schmitter termed these hybrid versions, *Dictablanda* (minimal changes towards democracy) and *Democradura* (extensive changes towards democracy) (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). Subsequently the Berlin Wall collapsed and the transition literature had to account for the changes in Eastern Europe, some of which were exogenously driven and as such had to be explained because they lay outside the transition to democracy scheme. It became apparent that the difference and in some cases the similarities between the transitions in Southern Europe and Latin America with those in Eastern Europe were the elites involved. Until then, the research focused primarily on the impact of bottom-up revolutionary struggles and it overemphasised leftist working class movements and unions (Collier 1991).

It quickly became apparent that most of these transitional and hybrid regimes were the result of top-down decisions rather than revolutionary activity by Guevara type revolutionaries and the subsequent research indicates that democratisation was driven by the upper middle class for selfish reasons, mostly to force the ruling regimes to accept them as partners in the decision-making process (Collier 1991). As the argument goes, rich elites excluded by rulers from decision-making are likely to bristle under authoritarianism and will very likely attempt to push for democratisation, something seen as the impact of inequality on democratisation (Albertus and Menaldo 2013). Obviously, richer more educated elites have an interest as stakeholders in the future of their country and as authoritarian regimes attempt to extract more and more wealth from them, they revolt. The nature of the elite and its social position can play a key role in the outcome of the transition to democracy. Economic elites have different interests from political elites who may in turn differ from both military elites and the public as a whole. Albertus and Menaldo argue that there are really three types of actors in transition games, a) economic, b) political and c) the public, and their gaming analysis of the interaction of the three results in the affirmation that the threat of property rights will cause the economic elites to support regime change (Albertus and Menaldo 2013).

Acemoglu and Robinson make the argument that nations fail because their political systems are extractive and incentivise rent-seeking behaviour (Acemoglu and Robinson 2013). In such regimes, there is a point in which the interests of the economic elite diverge from the interests of the political regimes who, by extracting too great a rent, threaten the wellbeing and property rights of the former. In these cases, economic elites switch their allegiance towards democratisation and move to produce a compacted democratic transition which will focus on the establishment of 'rules of the game' favourable to the economic elite (Boix 2003). In such cases as Mexico and South Africa we see elite driven democratisation which not only aims at better political results, i.e. governance, but also secures the property rights and other interests of the economically dominant classes, i.e. the wealthy part of society. Why, then, would political elites in non-democratic countries, i.e. the military in most cases, attempt to extract such a potentially hazardous rent?

First, because economic elites are not as salient as political elites. The salience of elite preferences is a sticky point for authoritarian regimes while in democratic regimes democratic party preferences are important (Stoll 2010). Preferences find vocal expression in political party agendas, in parliamentary democracies as 'the' agenda, and in presidential systems like the US, in the form of competing interest groups attempting to dominate the debate. In authoritarian regimes, the analysis is not as easy to achieve. Oppressive regimes most times do not need to heed to pressure groups, though sometimes they do because of exogenous factors such as approximation to Western European Democracies, as Levitsky and Way (2010) have shown. Nonetheless, 'regime outcomes hinged on the character of state and ruling party organisations. Where incumbents possessed developed and cohesive party structures, they could thwart opposition challenges, and competitive authoritarian regimes survived; where incumbents lacked such organisational tools, regimes were unstable but rarely democratised' (Levitsky and Way

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2010). In-group v. out-group dynamics always help political elites solve their elite preference problem. As Blaydes, among others, has very effectively argued, the 'authoritarian regime in Egypt uses the highly competitive electoral market as an indirect mechanism for the allocation of rents or access to rents – both relatively scarce resources – to members of Egypt's broad elite coalition' (Blaydes 2008).

Second, because the impact of political decisions taken by rulers may not affect everyone in the economic elite the same way, thus splitting the block so to speak. In their seminal work, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith have argued that bad behaviour is almost always good for politics because it is fragmented. They divided these societal groups into interchangeable, influential and essential. The key for ruling a country is the size of your coalition. The coalition is then built on the support of essential (elite) members which, barring benefits to their class, would otherwise defect making staying in power impossible. They then came up with five rules for potential dictators: first, keep your winning coalition as small as possible. Second, keep your nominal selectorate as large as possible. Third, control the flow of revenue. Fourth, pay your key supporters just enough to keep them loyal. Fifth, do not take money out of supporters' pockets to make the people's lives better (De Mesquita and Smith 2011, 17–18). The analysis is because the body politic is fragmented and small but influential coalitions can make or break the ruler.

Third, the benefits of taking unfavourable action against economic elites may outweigh the benefits of support from such elites. While authoritarian rulers may not be as vulnerable and as dependent on the public as democratic ones, in certain cases and usually during times of stress it might seem beneficial to them to take on small economic elites that have supported them to increase favour with the public. The best example of this has been Robert Mugabe's expropriations of agricultural lands that belonged to white farmers in Zimbabwe in 2000 (Meldrum 2000). It would seem counter-intuitive that by destroying the country's farming community the leader would derive a benefit when famine became a real possibility and immigration to South Africa became the only way to seek financial security, and yet it makes absolute sense in political terms. Mugabe was attempting to both provide some additional support for his loyalists at the expense of the most powerful economic elite in the country while also increasing the selectorate favouring him through a highly populist move of land re-distribution. The decision was influenced by political incentives, which at that time in Zimbabwe did not coincide with the economic elites' interests and the result seems to have justified the action as Robert Mugabe, who just celebrated his ninetieth birthday, remained in power fourteen years after that decision, with fiery rhetoric according to some sources (The Guardian 2014). Albertus and Menaldo have argued that 'the majority of Latin American countries have experienced at least one large-scale expropriation of land, banks, or natural resources under autocracy from 1950-2002' (Albertus and Menaldo 2013).

Given the research discussed on the process of democratisation so far, it is hardly a surprise that most revolts against authoritarian regimes fail to produce legitimate liberal democratic regimes.

Path Dependency

It is my contention that variations in the outcomes of the Arab Revolts which have been titled the Arab Spring are due to path dependency and exogenous stimuli. What is path dependency? According to Pierson,

'The notion of path dependence is generally used to support a few key claims: Specific patterns of timing and sequence matter; starting from similar conditions, a wide range of social outcomes may be possible; large consequences may result from relative "small" or contingent events; particular courses of action, once introduced can be virtually impossible to reverse; and consequently, political developments are often punctuated by critical junctures that shape the basic contours of social life' (Pierson 2000).

Historical institutionalist explanations, such as the seminal work of Ruth and David Collier in their book *Shaping the Political Arena*, describe how movements such as those that occurred during the Arab Spring are not only consequential but also critical in shaping the future of those countries. In their research, Collier and Collier look at eight Latin American countries and the changing relationships between labour movements and the state, which led to major changes in those movements' relations with both the state and the business class over time. Considering that most of Latin America was, at the time of the research, authoritarian, one could safely use their research design to extrapolate upon the changes of the relationship between public movements in several Arab countries and the state

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(Collier and Collier 1991).

Several components go into the creation of a 'critical juncture' as defined by Collier and Collier. First, the base line would be the antecedent conditions, or alternative explanation why the events occur, i.e. in this case Arab authoritarianism if looking at the region as whole, or kleptocratic militarism in the case of Egypt, Libya, or Sudan. Second, the crisis itself would be the events that followed Bouazizi's self-immolation and the publication of the WikiLeaks documents that showed the depth of corruption in Tunisia. Third, the three components of the legacy of the crisis: a), the mechanism of crisis production, b), the mechanism of re-production of the crisis and c), the stability of the core attributes of the legacy. If the legacy of the Arab Spring is a liberal democratic regime, which the only case this might be true is Tunisia, then the importance of the mass movements that produced the toppling of the Tunisian government would be most important, but the method by which the new institutions have been decided (aka reproduction), as well as the durability of the new institutions created would also be important.

Yet, as we see in most countries that experienced revolts following the Tunisian insurrection, the establishment of a critical juncture is difficult to begin with. Does a cleavage exist when it produces no discernible conflict? What would be the cleavages in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, etc. as opposed to Libya, Syria, and Yemen? Despite the shortcomings of the idea of a path dependent political transformation, clearly, there is a point in time at which certain countries may never return to status quo ante conditions and these are the countries, which have experienced particularly brutal civil wars in which the state itself has been dissolved. In these cases, it seems the cleavages have been well documented, both in the academic and popular presses and are: a) ethnic/tribal groups, b) religious groups, and c) a combination of a and b. In the countries with little change wherein consistency became the issue, such as in Saudi Arabia, primarily, as well as Kuwait and Sudan, the regime used the Dictator's Handbook very effectively. The Saudi King 'proving very flexible' basically allocated an enormous fortune towards public housing, raised salaries of public employees and consented to local/municipal elections in which, women could vote (Salih and Edin 2013).

Yet, despite design flaws, path dependence as a social science concept could prove a useful analytical tool in cases such as Jordan, Egypt, and Tunisia, as cases in which the Arab Spring as an event has produced variable results regarding the process of democratisation. Considering the variation of resulting political landscapes, all three of the authoritarian regimes had to adapt in the post-2010 world. Jordan is well positioned to use the relative responsiveness of the regime under King Abdullah and the existential threat of the war in Syria and the Palestinian conflict to avoid further concessions toward democratisation. Tunisia's case would be the textbook example of a critical juncture producing a legacy which would be reinforced and continue, while Egypt would be the case in which the cleavage failed to produce a legacy. This comparative study would be most fascinating.

Exogenous Stimuli

The major flaw in the historical institutionalist account of democratisation would be the effects of major external stimuli. The idea of a critical juncture is thus an extremely useful correction in our thinking, which would allow us to address the above shortcoming. Specifically, was there external stimuli in the case of the Arab Spring? If so, what was it? The argument was advanced that in the age of globalised information, the publication of the internal communication of the US State Department regarding Tunisia became the catalyst for its critical juncture (Friedman 2011). Social media became the favourite mode of organisation in much of the world with the advances in the age of internet and so there is nothing surprising about using the technology to one's own advantage but in this case, the medium is also the principal actor.

Another more apparent exogenous stimulus is third country involvement during the time of crisis in most countries that experienced serious revolts following the Tunisian revolt. A cursory look suggests that in countries, in which third party involvement was greatest, the intensity of the conflict tended to magnify and thus conditions were created for an irreversible break with the past. Could the comparativist seeking to explain the process of change in the Arab world ignore the impact of American intervention or Russian assistance upon the institutional structure? Or for that matter the existence or not of a country? Not to exaggerate the impact of international relations on the process of democratisation in the Arab world, but great power intervention must be considered. The clearest example of third

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party action hijacking a revolution is the civil war in Syria which may in a sense be part of the larger Arab Spring revolutionary movement but which has quickly devolved into a proxy war between global and regional powers. First, the United States and Russia have different agendas and troops on the ground (Barnard and Shumali 2015). Second, while jostling for power in Syria, regional powers, such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states became involved, supporting their own interests in the region sometimes by direct force or by supplying weapons to groups they feel support their worldview (Gerges 2013).

Most importantly, once we disaggregate the citizens of the countries around the world, which have recently experienced increased violence due to political events, one should consider what the relationship between the main actors is. If Friedman is right and the internet partially caused the Arab world to revolt against authoritarian regimes, it would be important to know that economic elites sided with the revolutionaries, denying help to the regimes, or that there was a definitive age factor in the mobilisation of the political activists which led the social movements that ended these regimes. What is the relationship between the youth of Egypt and the youth of Tunisia or Jordan? It is obviously similarly important to social science to examine the reverse relations of third party involvement in the creation of these crises, which in democratisation speak, would be a critical juncture in the political life of the countries in question. Are the processes in play the same in Tunisia, Jordan, and Egypt, or was there greater third party involvement in each and did such involvement change the events of the crisis? Especially when looking at revolts that have taken place after 2011, much will be said about the impact of involvement of third parties on the fate of the democratisation process.

Conclusion

The political crises that erupted following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, since termed the Arab Spring, have led social scientists to several assumptions about the way political change happens in modern societies. Although structural and demographic factors have been consistently favoured as explanations for the change in the Arab world, more careful analysis and research points to the impact of national elites. The composition and behaviour of said elites, political, economic, military, and their interrelationship, as well as exogenous stimuli, are extremely important in mapping the trajectories of the revolts. It is my contention that the process of democratisation in each Arabic country will be a function of the composition of the winning coalition of domestic elites and the existence or absence of external stimuli.

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