

Governing Chaos: Uncertainty and the Comparative Examination of the 2010/2011 Uprisings in North Africa

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Abstract

This article engages the theoretical debate on 'continuity and change' before and after the so-called 'Arab Spring' and argues that the notion of uncertainty can further our understanding of continuity and change in the region. The article argues that the scholarship on the Middle East has so far failed to produce relevant theoretical innovation as an effect of the theoretical instruments previously dominant in the discipline, namely the two paradigms of democratization and authoritarian resilience. The article is composed of four sections. After a short examination of the two 'paradogmas' and their rigidities, the article focuses on the issues that scholars have debated after the outburst of the Arab Uprisings, examining those assumptions that the uprisings have contributed to dismantle. Next, the article discusses the notion of uncertainty as analytical tool and it finally examines three case-studies in order to substantiate the claims about its usefulness.

Keywords: Arab Spring; democratization; authoritarian resilience; uncertainty; transition; North Africa.

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Introduction

The fall of long-standing authoritarian regimes in North Africa has been much of a surprise for everyone. Politicians have seen their plans for a controlled political liberalization hijacked by the explosion of political discontent, paradoxically caused by the neo-liberal reforms which were supposed to bring about that very controlled liberalization. The EU also had to give up its plan of finding a compromise between political liberalization and maintaining friendly dictators for security purposes. As for the academic community, scholars are confused because of the unclear and fast unfolding of the events, and this is evidenced by the difficulty that they have in finding proper and working theoretical tools for examining the Arab Uprisings. This is also mirrored by the fact that there is no shared or common expression for referring to the Arab 'thing': revolutions, awakening, uprisings, spring are only some among the expression that are currently used. The main contention of this article is that the scholarship is crossing a phase of descriptive bias and so far is lacking an analytical tool to examine the current state of affairs in the 'post-Spring' countries. Following on from this, the article (re)proposes the notion of 'uncertainty,' namely a multi-dimensional, theoretical device, to make sense of the diverse trajectories of change and continuities in the 'post-Spring' North Africa (O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead 1986; Bunce and Csanádi 1993; Schedler 2001; Rizman 2006).

The geographical focus this article adopts is justified by the fact that the countries ranging from Morocco to Egypt have displayed a number of differences and similarities,¹ and have followed very diverse paths in terms of developments of political trajectories. In determining such trajectories, the element of uncertainty played an important role as it has influenced elite bargain, dialogue between dissent groups, social movements and institutions, as well as the international attitude towards the events taking place in the countries under consideration. Indeed, this article makes the point that uncertainty has analytical power in explaining the dynamics of continuity and change in the context of the 'Arab Uprisings.' Even if uncertainty has mainly been examined and adopted in the context of democratization studies, the article argues that it has an untapped potential in explaining political and institutional change, well beyond mainstream democratization and authoritarian resilience. Indeed, the two 'paradogmas' of democratization and authoritarian resilience are far too rigid

1 The article focuses on Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt. Algeria and Libya are not considered here.

to give a satisfactory explanation, despite having for years provided the researchers with two powerful analytical tools: 'democracy-spotting' on the one side and the explanation of institutional patterns of authoritarian rule and practice on the other side. Moreover, scholars are also struggling to find a way to better highlight the open-ended, living and contested character of the revolutionary phenomena, without falling into the trap of assigning the uprisings a set of well-defined outcomes (Sallam 2013). In this sense, the suggestion of avoiding the 'democracy vs authoritarianism' taxonomy by leaving behind normative biases in the study of political change is precious (Teti 2012). Here, the suggestion of examining the meta-meaning of the democratization studies' toolkit is taken on board: 'continuity' and 'change' do not equate with 'authoritarian resilience' and 'democratic change,' and do not constitute a 'complex linearity' (Teti 2012) according to which change is preferable to continuity.

Uncertainty can help to highlight the process through which continuity and change are intertwined. For instance, after the regime changed and new governments came to power, it is evident that the characteristics and the personnel of former regimes still play a role in the decision-making processes of North African countries. This is not only valid for Egypt, as Morocco as well displays an ability to foster change in actual continuity and also Tunisia has been debating the exclusion of the former regime's elite for a long time (Meddy-Weizman and Zisenwine, 2013; Slama, 2013). In this context, uncertainty in elite turnover (Bunce and Csanádi 1993) may have an explanatory power in answering questions such as: who is in charge after the regime changes? What has remained unchanged in the reconfiguration of power after the Arab Uprising? Are the 'old' political elites still relevant? If so, why? And in which sectors of the institutional and economic life of these countries? How has contentious politics been transformed in the wake of institutional change? Are the social and political actors confrontational towards the new governments in place, or has the new political elite co-opted them? Are the most relevant economic sectors the object of a struggle between the 'new' and 'old' political elite? These are some of the questions scholars have been passionately debating over the last years, and uncertainty can help understand the political dynamics originating in contexts of change and continuity.

The article is composed of four main sections. After a short examination of the

two 'paradogmas' and their rigidities, the article focuses on the issues that scholars have debated after the outburst of the Arab Uprisings, examining the assumptions that the uprisings have contributed to dismantle. Next, the article discusses the notion of uncertainty as analytical tool and examines three case-studies in order to substantiate the claims about its usefulness.

The Inter-*'paradogma'* Debate

Two are the paradigms that have dominated the study of Middle Eastern politics until recently: transitology on the one side, and authoritarian resilience on the other. 'Transitology' is the science examining the democratization of Middle Eastern countries by 'spotting democratic enclaves' in society and by highlighting the potential for democratization of government-led liberalizations (Anderson 2006). Transitology has become a 'science' as its normative and teleological nature did not leave any room for alternative political development but democratization (Carothers 2002). Transitology built taxonomy out of democratic transition: the success of democratic reforms was perceived as advancement on the road toward a fully democratic system, whereas the failure of democratic reforms was perceived as a temporary setback, an impasse, on that road. The Middle East has been studied through these lenses for decades, but in early 2000s it became evident that the much awaited democratization was actually not taking place, and that 'transitology' had lost its explanatory power. Following from this consideration, a new paradigm developed, embodying a sort of reaction to transitology's optimism (justified by the examples of Eastern Europe and Latin America). This paradigm had at its core the notion that authoritarian regimes were there to stay and held that the efforts for promoting democracy were actually useless because authoritarians went 'smart' and were able to adapt and cope with such efforts. This was the notion of 'upgrading authoritarianism' (Heydemann 2007) which explained the persistence of authoritarianism despite liberalization (Hinnebusch 2006). In this context, civil society was understood not as a democratic enclave but as an instrument in the regime's hand to exert control and to instrumentally display a democratic façade to international donors (Wiktorowicz 2000; Carothers 2002; Schlumberger and Albrecht 2004; Schlumberger 2010; Liverani 2008; Cavatorta and Durac 2010; Jamal 2007). Despite being still enlightening of some dynamics (Heydemann and Leenders 2011), both democratic transition and authoritarian resilience have a degree of rigidity which has prevented scholars to 'see' the uprisings coming (Teti and Gervasio 2011). Both paradigms understand

social and political phenomena as conducive to either democratization or authoritarian strengthening. On the one side, transitology has put too much emphasis on the democratization potential of civil society and liberal reforms whereas, on the other side, authoritarian resilience has relied too heavily on state structures, elites and social benefits in maintaining authoritarian regimes in place. However, criticism of these two paradigms is helping scholars to further deepen their understanding of Middle East politics: the Arab Uprisings have indeed stressed the inconsistencies of the two paradigms, making their limitations evident.

The Arab Uprisings and Middle Eastern Studies

The Arab Uprisings, their open-ended nature and the contrast between the Moroccan and Algerian resilience, the Tunisian and Egyptian 'chaos,' and the war in Libya have questioned if not dismantled some well-established ideas about change and continuity in the region. In particular:

1. *Transition as a teleological process.* Although it seemed clear to the scholarly community that transition does not equate with democratization (Levitsky and Way 2010; McFaul 2002; Bunce 2003), the outbreak of the protests re-boosted the scholars' interest for the democratization paradigm (Stepan 2012) and 'democracy spotting' (Hudson 2012), which has been re-assessed as a reliable analytical tool because it correctly identified the protagonists of the uprisings. After this early enthusiasm for democratization, which has been soon cooled down by the political development in the region, the unfinished nature of the transitions has stimulated the need of thinking and re-thinking to transition and political change. Indeed, as some scholars noted (Teti 2012; Valbjørn 2012), we should not confuse transition *per se* and transitology, and we should keep democracy and democratization distinct. In this context, some have relied more comfortably on alternative conceptualisation from neo-marxist and post-structuralist tradition of thought (Zemni, De Smet, Bogaert 2012), highlighting the constituent role of the masses and the immanence of struggles in contrast to the normative nature of transitology (Rivetti 2013).

2. *Neo-liberal economic reforms empower a gradual transition and a democratic middle-class.* For decades, scholars have researched the relationship between free-market reforms and democratization, discussing the power of free market to promote and establish a democratic-minded middle class (Diamond, Linz and Lipset 1988; Marks and Diamond 1992; Henry and Springborg 2010). Similarly, the pres-

sure exerted by the European Union over the North African governments for the implementation of reforms was motivated by the belief that a controlled political opening would have promoted a gradual democratization, empowering a democratic, moderate-minded middle class (Durac and Cavatorta 2009; Seeberg, Cavatorta and Pace 2009). The Arab Uprisings proved this assumption quite wrong. In the case of Tunisia, Haugbolle and Cavatorta (2012) observe that the implementation of such controlled liberalization caused a massive anti-liberal popular discontent, empowering lower social classes and engendering discontent among the middle class. The case of Egypt too highlights the crucial role played by the workers, the 'disenfranchised' and the have-nots (Springborg 2011). In a similar vein, Pace and Hassan (2012) found that the international policies of democracy and free-market promotion were quite counter-productive in the case of North Africa, because they did not engender a gradual, controlled liberalization; on the contrary, they provoked massive popular discontent which exploded in insurgencies and toppled down the West's friend dictators.

3. *The Middle East has no workers' movement and 'civil society' is the sole democratic actor: unintended consequences and unusual suspects.* The policies of democracy and free market promotion did not persuade the middle class and had unintended consequences that scholars and policy-makers have largely overlooked. In particular, economic reforms engendered discontent among the middle class and widened the gap between those who benefitted from liberalization and those who did not (Aita 2011; Springborg 2011). As for political liberalizations, the scholarly focus on the 'usual suspects,' namely NGOs, mostly secular, moderate political parties and other 'traditional' members of civil society, has proven to be misleading (Rivetti 2013a, Rivetti and Cavatorta 2013). The 'disenfranchised,' trade unions and workers were the actual protagonists of the protests. Some scholars have therefore urged their colleagues to devote attention to the so-called 'unusual suspects,' namely first those actors who unexpectedly turned into a threat to the stability of authoritarian regimes (Aarts and Cavatorta 2013; Lust 2011); second, workers' strikes and trade union activism (Allal 2009; Chomiak and Entelis 2011; Beinín 2009); and third transnational connections, on-line as well as off-line networking and alliance-building among activists from diverse backgrounds and walks of life (Abdelrahman 2011; Faris 2008; Kraetzschmar special issue 2011).

4. *Political apathy.* In contrast to the assumption that the strength of authoritarian rule was engendering major political indifference and apathy among the public, the uprisings in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia and the protests in Algeria and Morocco suggest a revival of politics. Such a revival has to be broadly understood: it encompasses the request of a renewal of state institutions, as the centrality of fair election among the protesters' requests proves (Valbjørn 2012; Murphy 2013). It also entails politics outside of state structures, such as for example freer media and more freedom of expression (Lynch 2011), and includes a political revival in a more private sphere too. As Asef Bayat (2009) and Lisa Wedeen (2008) have shown, our understanding of politics needs to be enlarged to consider how ordinary people accommodate their own life and beliefs in the light of the power of the (authoritarian) state. As Rex Brynen, Peter Moore, Bassel Salloukh and Marie-Joëlle Zahar (2013) noted, ideational notions of legitimacy have often been overlooked in favour of more material incentives and disincentives.

5. *Middle East exceptionalism.* Beyond being a continuous reference for the *indignados* and the Occupy movements, the Arab Uprisings have also represented a further blow against the Middle Eastern exceptionalism. In North Africa, people have risen referring to 'global' slogans, namely reclaiming democracy and social justice. Beyond sharing a pro-democracy sentiment and commitment with much of the world population (Tessler 2002), contrary to what 'exceptionalists' claim, there are other characteristics shared by the Arab and Western protester. One is the attention to the issue of generational gap, which is evidenced by the difference in the political backgrounds of older and younger generations (Anderson 2011), and motivated not only by the frustration for a tight political control but also for the absence of social security and welfare measures for the younger generation (Al-Momani 2011). Second, there is a shared use of media and ITC. It is interesting to note that some scholars started to compare 'democratic European' and 'not-democratic MENA' regimes (Teti and Mura 2013; Cavatorta 2010), arguing that such comparisons can further our comprehension of illiberal convergences that are taking place all over the world, not only in the 'traditionally anti-democratic Muslim world.'

6. *Reforms and institutionalised patterns of governance are merely a façade and are irrelevant to Arab politics.* The debate over the resilience of authoritarianism has often argued that reforms and institutionalised patterns of governance are a façade

for covering up authoritarian rule for purposes of international credibility. This has proved to be correct in a number of cases, in particular when reforms were conducive to co-optation or strengthened the control over the economy and society on the part of authoritarian regimes. However, the Arab Uprisings have stimulated scholars to further engage statehood in Arab countries, with a particular focus on North Africa because of the presence of varied trajectories of political change and continuity and, in the 'post-Spring' era, of a number of different political environments. As already noted in the context of the post-democratization studies (Valbjørn and Bank 2010, special issue; Teti 2012; Valbjørn 2012), scholars have turned to 'dated' studies in order to explain current phenomena, such as the resilience and the ability of managing change on the part of Arab monarchies (Anderson 1991; Lynch 2013; Hinnebusch 2010), or the modes of transition (Beck and Hüser 2012), echoing the very first wave of democratization studies (O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead 1986). These debates reassess the importance of looking closely at patterns of governance in the MENA region. Moreover, while discussing the differences among the outcomes of the protests in North Africa and the Middle East, George Joffé (2011), Lisa Anderson (2011) and Frédéric Volpi (2012 and 2013) also suggest that reforms and patterns of governance are relevant and meaningful to Middle Eastern politics, a conclusion also reached by Ray Hinnebusch in the case of Syria (2012, 106). Indeed, they all find that those systems having an institutionalised framework for reforms, such as Morocco or Algeria, are more resilient than those authoritarian systems with no opportunities or channels for change. The authors also reaffirm the importance of reforms as a meaningful political instrument for conveying and taming political change. This finding somehow runs counter the assumption that reforms are meaningless as they are only aimed at mystifying authoritarian rule. Although this is true in some cases (Hinnebusch 2012, 112; Pruzan-Jorgensen 2010), this last development of the scholarship supports the need to further engage the issue and make our understanding of change and continuity richer and multi-layered. Finally, governance and formal institutions have proved to be crucial in the political life of these countries also because they are seen as the legitimate site of the political game. This is further evidence against Orientalist and Neo-Orientalist assumptions about the anti-systemic nature of the Arab/Muslim culture, whatever it might mean (see Sadowski 1993). A quite interesting aspect of the Arab Uprisings is that the protesters' claims revolved around the issue of fair election, government accountability and respect for institutions. There were no 'radical' requests such as either the establishment of an Islamic or neo-Marxist

systems. This suggests that 'liberal' formal political institutions seem to be at the top of the Arab peoples' preferences. This is also evidenced by the fact that all political actors, even the radical ones such as the Salafists, view the taking over of institutions through multi-party elections as the core essence of politics.

7. *Assumptions about Islamists and Islamism in the Arab world.* Finally, the Arab Uprisings have proved a number of assumptions about Islamism in the MENA region to be wrong. The first assumption argued that Islamism constitutes the only and unique alternative to authoritarianism. As almost every observer has noted, Islamists were either underrepresented among the protesters or absent from both the street-protests and their organisational committees. Moreover, the call for establishing an Islamic government or implementing some fundamentalist interpretation of the religious law has not featured among the claims of the protesters; religious symbols were not particularly present either (Roy 2011). However, this does not equate with arguing that Islam and religious symbolism have had no role, or that the revolutionary masses were secular or anti-religious. Indeed, Islamists proved to be a major force in election, also thanks to their credibility as anti-regime forces and their organisational structures. The second assumption that has been proved to be wrong is the fact that, should Islamists reach the power, they would turn into anti-Western fundamentalists. Opposite to this, the Arab Uprisings and the Islamists' electoral victory have added further evidence to the already existing observation that Islamist parties do actually compromise and implement moderate policies on a number of issues when in power, as the case of the Moroccan Islamist party, the *partie de la justice et du développement*, had already demonstrated (Wegner and Pellicer 2009).

Degrees of Continuity and Change in the Study of Transitional Contexts: The Role Of Uncertainty

Considering the overlap of dynamics of both rupture and consistency with the past, the idea of examining the events on the ground through the prism of continuity and change seems to be the best option. Continuity and change are overlapping dynamics well-known to the debate on democratization and post-democratization for two reasons. First, Valbjørn and Bank (2010) have explicitly called for focusing the attention on the 'actual continuity in the apparent changes' and the 'actual changes in the apparent continuity' in order to grasp relevant political dynamics when examining contexts in transformation. While criticising the limitations of the current debate on democratization, the two authors argue that

due to the tendency of equating change with democratization, the lack of change *of* regime form has been construed as a stand-still at the expense of attention to changes *within* regimes (e.g., a transformation from populist to post-populist authoritarianism), *in* the relations with the opposition (e.g., the changing regime/Islamist parties dynamics) and *within* the latter (e.g., an emerging cooperation between the secular Left and Islamists), and finally changes *in* the society at large (e.g., the emergence of alternative orders coexisting in parallel with the official political order) (Valbjørn and Bank 2010, 188).

Continuity also needs to be addressed in terms of 'continuity in the current mode of exerting power,' whether democratic or not. For example, continuity in the configuration of the patterns of power distribution among the elite can be found in contexts of massive change, as Ellis Goldberg (2011) noted in the case of Egypt in the early post-Mubarak period, whereas the changes taking place in a context of substantial continuity can have further developments and consequences, as Jillian Schwedler (2007) observed in the case of the inclusion of Islamists in the political system of Yemen and Jordan.

Second, the notion of 'degrees of change and continuity' is not new to social scientists more generally. For example, scholars of the post-WW2 era in Europe already underlined the strong continuities in the Italian political system before and after 1945 in terms of personalities, power distribution among political networks and elite values (Pavone 1995). By revisiting an 'old' idea, this article aims to find out potential analytical tools for examining the current 'state of politics' in the region.

Furthermore, I will refer to the study of *transitional contexts* to build a theoretical background for the examination of the degrees of continuity and change. The study of how regimes do change is indeed different from transitology, and my insight into the study of transitional contexts leaves behind both the democratization-oriented teleology and the normative *élan* of democratization. Moreover, there is a widespread consensus on the open-ended nature of the uprisings, and the study of transitional context engages such open flux with no pre-established interpretations or goals. As

for the theoretical references, my insight builds on the study of Central Asian post-Soviet transitions, as scholars of post-Soviet studies have been confronted with many transitions, few democratic happy-ends in a context characterised by both striking continuities and overwhelming changes. This scholarship is very helpful when it comes to the study of continuity and change in the context of North African countries, as it can help revealing relevant dynamics.

One of the most relevant contribution of post-Soviet studies to the fields of democratization and political change has been the questioning of the notion of 'pacted' transitions as taken from the early transition/democratization literature, highlighting how 'pacted' transitions are not always conducive to democracy (McFaul 2002; Bunce 1995; Luong 2002). This was an important step in the re-examination of the studies on political transitions, as this finding runs contrary to what the early transitology argued, namely that elite bargain equated with democratization whereas regime changes caused by popular insurgencies equated with chaos and return to non-democratic rule (O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead 1986). This view stemmed from the elitarian approach of early transitology, which later went under criticism on the part of many scholars among whom those of post-Soviet Central Asia. They indeed have been able to disavow two strong prejudices of transition studies: the first is about the positive role of elite in democratization and the second is about the equation between regime change and democratization. Well before the scholars of the Middle East, post-Soviet experts have stressed the non-consequential link between regime change and democratization. But beyond these two important theoretical contributions, post-Soviet scholarship has also stressed the role of uncertainty in determining the potential for change or the preference for continuity.

In countries undergoing a transition, the context in which individuals act and interact is not stable, but erratic. Transitions entail not only the potential for change from antecedent conditions, such as previously clarified identities, interests, and relative capacities; transitions also entail a high degree of uncertainty about the nature and direction of this change (Luong 2002; Schedler 2001; Bunce and Csanadi 1993). As a result, individuals face a great deal of uncertainty regarding both present circumstances and future outcomes. Under such conditions, assessments of relative power are particularly vulnerable to uncertainty because even the slightest possible change in the status quo threatens not only to disrupt a country's internal

balance of power but also to call into question the very indicators on which that balance is based. Moreover, as the transition continues to unfold, it is not clear how these changes will affect power asymmetries. This is further complicated by the fact that multiple transitions create multiple indicators on which actors base their assessments of change in relative power. Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn's (2008) ethnographic research on the former Soviet Union, Eastern and Central European, and Mongolian societies shows how the transitional contexts are not a 'bridge' between socialism and capitalism, but a state of deep uncertainty. Her work on individuals' activities, memory, social networks, and culturally specific values suggests that 'uncertainty is a complex conceptual space that offers further opportunities to step away from the evolutionary mode of thinking and to develop theories of multiple ways of being.' Following on from this consideration, the actors' perceptions create multiple possible dimensions of transitions, which characterise the transitional contexts as definitely open and not pre-determined. Thus, the context in which individuals act and interact to design institutions, both from above through elite bargain and from below through mass mobilisation or the politics of everyday-life, becomes a transitional context, wherein pre-existing rules and procedures are not necessarily stable or mutually recognised. Uncertainty can be a working analytical tool for explaining not only the dynamics of change or the resilience of mechanisms of power distribution. Uncertainty can also explain how change and continuity are configured.

As highlighted by Pauline Jones Luong in her analysis of the Kazakh post-Soviet transition (2002), the consequence of uncertainty is that all interactions among the relevant actors in the transitional context become strategic. Such strategic decisions seek distributional advantage based on the actors' perception of shifts in relative power. Nevertheless, Luong is not arguing for a rational choice approach. On the contrary, she underlines how uncertainty enhances the role of the structural-historical context, because this serves as the basis for the actors' institutional preferences and assessment of relative power.

Luong's understanding of the interactions among the actors in a transitional context is particularly insightful because it is able to bridge structure-oriented and agency-oriented theories. Indeed, the notion of strategic interaction can put structure and agency into dialogue. Structure-oriented theories suggest that continuity and the resilience of the institutional establishment have the leading role in determin-

ing the perspective of a transitional context but the actors' unstable perceptions of shift in relative power can radically re-shape the bias towards continuity (Thelen and Steinmo 1992; Weingast 1996). This approach highlights the dynamic interplay and interactions between structure and agency, rather than privileging either the structural-historical context or the immediate, strategic attitude of the actors. Moreover, this approach sees interactions as dynamic rather than static. It thus not only places asymmetrical power relations at the centre of analysis, but also recognises the effect that uncertainty and the potential for change have on actors' continuous assessments of their relative power, which, in turn, influences their bargaining strategies. In sum, both structure and agency influence the degrees of continuity and change. Thus, while the source of continuity can be found in the structural-historical context, the transference of the 'past' into the 'present' is neither complete nor automatic. It could indeed be accepted or rejected by the actors involved. This approach can also allow for the identification of the sources of both continuity and change (such as, for example, the actors' regional identity or their economic role in the society), and is helpful in framing change and continuity as a matter of degrees rather than in absolute terms. Finally, the study of transitional contexts brings us beyond the debate over the 'resilience of authoritarianism vs. democratization,' moving from interpreting the trajectory of transitions to their very characteristics, which are determined by the dynamic interactions of the players acting in the transitional context.

Uncertainty, Continuities and Changes in Transitioning North Africa

In order to substantiate the arguments discussed above, three case-studies are examined in this section. The first is the case of Egypt and in particular, the interplay between the 'square' and the Army in the ousting of President Mohammad Morsi in early July 2013. Here, uncertainty played an important role as the lack of knowledge about the 'real nature' of the Muslim Brotherhood's quest of power (Nawara, 2013) made social and political opponents to the Muslim Brotherhood keener on accepting and even supporting the coup. Indeed, one of the main obstacles to the democratic consolidation in post-Mubarak Egypt, has been the difficult identification of 'democratic forces'. This is not only because Egyptian political parties hardly have a democratic track record, but also because of the fragmentation of the oppositional front after the ouster of Mubarak. Not only does this have generated continuing uncertainty about a genuine, not rhetorical commitment to democracy on the part of the different political forces, but it also means that all political actors have been determining their

future strategies according to assessment of relative power, rather than according to the commitment to democratic principles (Landolt and Kubicek 2013). This environment characterised by uncertainty about democratic commitment, sorted the paradoxical outcome of leaving activists commenting that “the ouster of Morsi in this manner was a completely democratic procedure. The will of the people triumphed and overthrew the Brotherhood rule (Al-Aswany, 2013).”

The second case-study taken into consideration, examines the continuities and changes characterising the process of institution-building and definition of *tunisianité* in post-Ben Ali's Tunisia. Indeed, the process of regime change with the institutionalisation of the Islamist party Nahda is the outcome of a long nation- and identity-building process which itself entails elements of both change and continuity. The revolution gave the opportunity and political space necessary to a conservative and Islamist middle-class to be included within the structures of power, which previously were at the disposal of secularist, pan-Arabist and modernist forces solely. This inclusion has been possible thanks to a compromise between the 'old', bourguibian middle-class and the 'new', Islamist middle-class. The existence of this compromise for the sake of institutionalisation has been acknowledged by the secularist and pan-Arabist President Marzouki, who declared that democracy in Tunisia will be created not in opposition to the Islamists (referring to Rachid Ghannouchi and Nahda), but with them (Marzouki, 2011). While the inclusion of the moderate Islamists represents with no doubt a mark of change with the past, this has come at the price of the continuing neglect of Tunisia's disenfranchised, who remain excluded from power-sharing dynamics in continuity with the past and who are mainly represented by the Salafist *mouvance* (Merone and Cavatorta 2013; Marks 2013). Indeed, at the end of August 2013, the Interior Minister presented in a press conference the outcome of the investigation justifying the classification of Ansar al-Sharia (AST, the Salafist Jihadi Tunisian group) as a terrorist organisation (Massy 2013).

The decision to exclude the Salafists from the legal, constitutional political game can be referred back to the role of uncertainty, which brought the moderate Islamists and the 'old' secularist forces together to face the 'common enemy'. Indeed, it is the outcome of the uncertainty and concern about the political strength of the Salafist, populist movement on the part of mainstream political actors. As Graham Usher put it “No one knows the salafis' strength. Most think the groups are small. But, powered

by Saudi money and the fervor of Tunisian cadre who learned their creed in the Afghan and Pakistani jihad, they could grow, especially if the economy remains in rough shape" (Usher 2011). The concern that uncertainty about the Salafis' actual strength led Rashid Gannoushi, Nahda's leader, to declare that Salafism exists in Tunisia, but "because of the long absence of Nahda [...]. We are in discussions with them. Our lawyers defended them when they were persecuted by Ben Ali. And I think most salafis will either join us or back us in the elections. Or they will face marginalization" (Usher 2011).

The third case to be explored is the one of Morocco, and in particular the role played by uncertainty in strengthening the position of the King as the sole and ultimate proponent of political change. In particular, this has been made possible by the extreme heterogeneity and divisions within the 20th February Movement, which theoretically represented a challenge to the King's power. Indeed, the movement has succeeded for a certain time to voice calls for a parliamentary monarchy in which the powers of the head of state, the King, would effectively be reduced, and in expressing their dissatisfaction with the most recent reforms promoted 'from above' (Fernández Molina 2011). However, the discrepancies within the 20th February Movement between those who support, albeit reluctantly, reforms backed by the Monarchy and those who advocate a process of change that rejects the influence of the Monarchy in the configuration of the future regime, have weakened the potential for the demonstrations to become more widespread. Beyond this, the King's reaction to the protest in early 2011 sorted the effect of containing discontent. The King indeed opted for opening a constitutional review process, which was led by the King himself and had its climax in the constitutional referendum of July 2011. These two processes allowed the King to depicting himself as the sole and unique source of change in the country. In such circumstances, uncertainty within the 20th February Movement about the requests and claims to advance *vis-à-vis* the Monarchy contributed to the demobilization and weakening of those social and political actors who had a role to play, including the movement itself (Desrues 2013; Bennani-Chraïbi and Jeghlaly 2012). Paraphrasing Valerie Bunce (2003) and Michael McFaul's (1999 and 1999a) scholarship on the relevance of political determination and sustained social mobilisation in determining the outcome of transitions and elite bargains, the case-study of the Moroccan 20th February Movement is a good example of how uncertainty and disunity can exclude relevant actors from bargains.

Conclusion

This article advances the hypothesis of utilising uncertainty as a theoretical instrument to strengthen the analysis of those political trajectories resulting from the outbreak of popular discontent in 2010/2011 in North Africa. In particular, uncertainty displays explanatory power as for the degrees of continuity and change in the political, social and economic life of North African countries before and after the uprisings and regime change. Uncertainty indeed does not only highlight the inconsistency of both the transition to democratization paradigm and the notion of the persistence of authoritarianism. It also sheds light on different conflicts that can arise among the actors engaged in a transitional context. Indeed, uncertainty does not only explain the rules of elite bargain, highlighting the reasons why and how authoritarian leaders may be able to get the upper hand in negotiations and protect their system of power. It can also be applied to social movements and dissent groups, explaining why and how some are able to survive, determine or suffer from the transition. Mechanisms governing such dynamics are indeed determined to different extents by the role of uncertainty and by assessments of relative power, which are deeply influenced by uncertainty itself.

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