

The Infrastructural Powers of Authoritarian States in the “Arab Spring”

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Introduction: The View From Below: Revolutions and Citizen Rights

I am by no means a specialist on the Middle East and North Africa and if I have anything useful to say about the states of the region it must come from my general background in comparative and historical sociology. I draw on three main themes of political sociology in my earlier work: my distinction between despotic and infrastructural power, my analysis of revolutions, and my view of citizenship.

I presented a theory of modern revolutions in Volumes 3 and 4 of my *The Sources of Social Power* (2012, Chaps. 6 & 13; 2013, Chap 9), though with only brief mention of the “Arab Spring” uprisings. Can we find guidance in previous revolutions for analyzing the Arab Spring? I begin with one overarching statement about revolutions. Where authoritarian regimes practice violent repression, we can be sure that much of their people would like to revolt. But in actuality the people rarely do revolt. This is because they think that the result of resistance would be either chaos or worse repression. The subjects of most regimes value stability. They have adjusted to life under either democracy or authoritarianism and they can achieve their everyday goals within the predictable parameters of their rule. An uprising, they believe, would make things unpredictable and probably worse. But on the rare occasions when one does occur and it appears to be successful, it tends to spark off a wave of uprisings elsewhere, as news of it spreads across discontented groups in neighboring or culturally connected countries. Now these peoples have hope they also can resist repression.

So revolutions come in waves. The late 18th century saw a wave of successful American, Dutch, French, and Haitian revolutions. 1848 saw a faster spread of uprisings across Europe sparked off by a French insurrection which overthrew the monarchy. But none of the later uprisings were successful. These two waves came long before any forms of telecommunication. Important news could nonetheless travel fast and regimes could not block the transmission of hope. The 20th century saw two major macro- regional waves of revolution, sparked off by the success of the Russian and Chinese revolutions. The first, inspired by Russia, spread across Central and Eastern Europe but was largely unsuccessful. The second spreading from China across much of East Asia was partly successful, though at great cost everywhere. A lesser, mostly unsuccessful wave came in Latin America in response to the successful Cuban revolution. So the fact that a successful uprising in Tunisia in 2011 should then spread rapidly across much of the Middle East and North Africa (the MENA countries) is normal. That is usually how revolutions come about. It is also usually the case that most of the late-comer uprisings are not successful since they tend to occur against regimes who are stronger than the insurgents think, and who have been alerted to possible threat by the other revolution.

Most of the revolutions listed above were social revolutions, seeking not just political regime change but also the wholesale transformation of society. Since the Arab Spring focused overwhelmingly on political regime change it differed from these cases, especially from the 20th century waves. These were led by determined Marxist revolutionaries able to mobilize workers and peasants with a clear view of a desired revolutionary social transformation. They believed that history was on their side and that socialism would everywhere replace capitalism. Moreover

regime legitimacy had been shredded by defeats in war, of Tsarist Russia in World War I, of Chinese Nationalism in World War II, and of other Asian regimes collaborating with the defeated Western and Japanese Empires. These are major differences from the Arab Spring, since Marxism is weak across the Islamic world, only Islamists want wholesale social transformation, and there have been no recent wars discrediting any regime in the region. Nonetheless, Latin American revolutions in Cuba and Nicaragua (plus other unsuccessful cases in the continent), and the fall of the Shah of Iran, had occurred without defeat in war, which is therefore an important but not strictly necessary factor in modern revolutions.

Scholars of the Arab Spring see it as a wave but insert it among a different group of uprisings, sometimes called the “Big Four”, though they would be more accurately described as the “Little Four” when compared to the French, Russian, or Chinese revolutions. The four are the revolutions of 1848, the fall of the Soviet Union 1989-1991, the “color revolutions” in some post-communist countries during 1998-2005, and the Arab Spring. These were all different, of course. 1848 differed for the reasons already mentioned. The Soviet Fall was not comparable to the Arab Spring, for it brought a fully-fledged social revolution and the regimes collapsed from within when Gorbachev made clear that he would no longer use repression. The color revolutions do have some similarities but also some differences. Clearly all revolutions are different and wholesale generalizations about them are risky.

Indeed revolutions are not the norm. They are rare. The historical norm in the West and in other advanced nations has not been revolution but struggles for reform, resulting in the population gradually moving from being subjects to citizens, acquiring a panoply of citizen rights. And though a political revolution was attempted in some MENA countries, in others the dissidents only urged the existing regime to introduce reforms. This brings me to the issue of citizenship. In 1949 the English sociologist T.H. Marshall made a useful distinction between three main types of citizen rights:

- 1) Civil citizenship: the right to freedom and equality before the law.
- 2) Political citizenship: the right to equal participation in free elections.
- 3) Social citizenship: a panoply of rights “from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society (1963 edition: p74).

Marshall saw the three emerging in that sequence, because this is what had happened in Britain, his main case. His British time-frame was civil rights acquired in the 18th century, political rights in the 19th century, and social rights in the 20th. That made sense there but in other countries, including the MENA countries, have differed. They tend also to remain incomplete, especially in terms of their breadth of coverage -- who has rights and who is excluded from them. Marshall’s conception of citizenship was also based on individual rights, yet there at least three communal bases of rights across the world in which the family, the clan or tribe, and the ethnically- or religiously- defined community may possess collective rights. These are complications. But one thing is clear: authoritarian regimes try to suppress claims to civil and political citizen rights but have more variable stances regarding social rights, which can be granted from above without diminishing the ruler’s power.

The View from Above: Despotic and Infrastructural Power

I seek to establish the nature of power in authoritarian states. In my 1984 article, “The autonomous power of the state”, I distinguished two different kinds of state power: despotic power (DP), which is the range of actions which the state elite is empowered to make without routine consultation with civil society groups; and secondly, infrastructural power (IP), the capacity of the state to actually penetrate civil society and so get its actions logically implemented throughout its territories. This is not confined to physical infrastructures like roads or radios. It comprises all means – physical or social – by which commands are implemented across the realm. The distinction between DP and IP enables us to see more clearly that states can be “strong” in two quite different ways. Though many historic monarchies were strong in DP, they tended to be weak in IP. Because of the low technological development of the means of routine communication and control in former times, their commands could only be executed by local lords and other worthies whose powers in their own localities were substantially autonomous of the ruler. Conversely modern capitalist democracies are despotically fairly weak – leaders rule only with the consent of representatives of civil society. Yet they have more IP. Take the example of taxation. Our salaries are taxed “at source” and most of us cannot evade this. We are forced to pay up. In earlier times states were largely confined to taxing wealth that visibly moved around – a much weaker form of infrastructural power. But there is no hiding place from the infrastructural reach of the modern state. Note, however that infrastructural power can be a two-way street, for the modern democratic state has little autonomy from its citizens. This means, of course, that modern states may be either democratic or authoritarian.

From this I construct four ideal-typical states. Where both DP and IP are low, I term the state “feudal” (as in medieval Europe); where IP is weak but DP high, it is “imperial” (like the Chinese Empire); where DP is weak but IP strong, the state is “democratic” (like Britain or the US today); and where both are high, the state is “authoritarian” (like the Soviet Union). I formerly used the term “bureaucratic”, not “democratic”, but this is inappropriate since it is a characteristic of all modern states. This yields the following typology.

Table 1: Two Dimensions of State Power (Revised).

Despotic Power		Infrastructural Power	
		Low	High
Low	Feudal	Democratic	
High	Imperial	Authoritarian	

These are ideal types of course. All real-world states are mixed. Nor can they be simply reduced to a division between modern and pre-modern states. In some pre-modern states, for example, regimes needing to directly tax their subjects, without resources of their own, usually had proto-democratic infrastructures of control forced on them. “No taxation without representation” turns out to be an ancient slogan, traceable all the way back to early Sumerian states (Blanting & Bargher, 2010). For their part, modern democracies are not totally lacking in despotic power, as

we see in the emergence of “deep” national security states today, where both government and private agencies can act secretively, without routine consultation, to tap our phones, hack our emails, and conduct arbitrary arrests in the name of “the war against terror” (it used to be the war against communism). Most Western states are currently becoming less democratic in these respects. Conversely, contemporary authoritarian states are not lacking in infrastructural powers. Almost all the MENA countries are authoritarian but they are modern states possessing some of the same infrastructures as Western states, plus some of their own. When the Egyptian state is equipped with 450,000 security police, it obviously possesses quite penetrative infrastructural power. So in the rest of this paper I will try to specify regime strengths and weaknesses, focusing later upon how they played out in the Arab Spring.

The Infrastructures of Authoritarian Regimes

All authoritarian regimes will try to hang onto power as long as possible. They will do almost anything to preserve their rule and they focus intensively on ways of doing this. Almost all the MENA states are authoritarian, more so than in any other region of the world (Springborg, 2007). As Owen (2012) has noted, the regimes also learn techniques of rule from each other. I now list the major infrastructures of power available to them, and I note their strengths and weaknesses. Not all of them are strictly necessary, and some can substitute for others. However, they also bring potential disadvantages for the regimes, as we shall see. I will then use this infrastructural model to explain the varied outcomes of the Arab Spring.

- (1) The use of physical infrastructures of communication to logically implement state decisions – roads, railroads, radio, television, education systems etc. These were greatly developed in the MENA countries in the 1950s and 1960s as they modernized. Democratic regimes also possess these physical infrastructures. The problem for authoritarian regimes is that these infrastructures are two-way streets: either the state may use them to dominate civil society or civil society can use them to control the state. We saw this especially in the role of the internet, social media and Al-Jazeera in mobilizing large crowds during the Arab Spring. Nonetheless, the regimes have the advantage here since more extensive physical infrastructures make not only censorship easier, but also repression.
- (2) A capacity to deploy repressive force across the realm, but especially in such centralized states in the capital city. Democracies also possess this capacity but use it only in emergencies, when for example they may declare martial law. In authoritarian regimes repression is normal. The first level of repression is judicial. An authoritarian regime is fortunate indeed if it can deal with opposition by legal means alone, through the regime’s arbitrarily declared and biased laws. These may ban demonstrations or outlaw certain political parties, for example. But authoritarian regimes tend to back this up with violence. Typically two state agencies are entrusted with violent repression, the army and paramilitary security police. Their deployment by authoritarian regimes is substantially autocratic, whereas in democracies it is in principle according to the rule of laws passed by democratic assemblies. Combined, these two agencies comprise what many people of the region call the “deep state”, the zone where they have no rights to protect them from arbitrary arrest, torture, and even murder. The problem here for the regimes – except

where the military actually rules (as in Algeria) – is that army training internalizes a caste-like *esprit de corps* which gives soldiers a sense of their own collective interests which may be distinct from those of the ruler. Roman emperors coped with this threat by forming their own Praetorian Guard to protect themselves from both the people and the army. Today's MENA rulers have two repressive strategies. They can use the security police as a Praetorian Guard against the army. Yet the police, much worse-armed than the army, could be easily defeated in armed conflict between them. Hence the second strategy is to factionalize the army, privileging especially loyal generals and units as Praetorian guards, or rotating potentially dissident generals or giving them air force or naval postings which considerably lessen their ability to mount coups. This produces many loyal higher-level officers who would have much to lose if the regime fell, but it also produces alienated officers. Both strategies carry the disadvantage of weakening either the loyalty or the unity of the repressive infrastructures.

- (3) Some degree of ideological legitimacy so that people will routinely obey regime directives. The greater the legitimacy, the less the need for violent repression and its dangers. We can think here of Weber's three principles of legitimacy, charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal. In new post-colonial states the first or second leader was often seen as "fathers of the nation", while towering figures like Nasser also possessed charisma. But charisma is a rare commodity in today's politically disillusioned world. In the MENA countries Islamic authorities are generally forces for tradition, liable to bring their traditional authority to the aid of regimes which are not secular, and they oppose secular liberalism. The Ulama provide very penetrative traditional authority through mosques and madrassas. Popular fear of instability also supports a clinging to tradition. The monarchies also claim traditional authority, but only the Moroccan dynasty is very old. The others are not hallowed by time, as the Shah of Iran discovered. If the Saudi kings and the Gulf potentates have retained their legitimacy, I suspect that this is because of other infrastructures listed here. Indeed, the principal source of legitimacy for all modern regimes, including democracies, is that they bring benefits to the country -- legitimacy by results – which is what Weber meant by rational legal authority. Specifically, a regime which experiences economic recession will feel vulnerable. Yet monarchy does have a more specific advantage: it reduces the risk of a succession crisis. These dynasties are old enough to routinely ensure succession according to primogeniture. Presidents cannot – Assad father and son being the exceptional case (Owen, 2012: 125, 140; Lust, 2011; Hale 2013: 347). Even so, succession in monarchies is not as smooth as in institutionalized democracies, where electoral institutions guarantee routinized changes from government to the opposition. In the long-run democracies produce more order than do authoritarian regimes, which is the opposite of what authoritarians claim. The main reason why democracies are gradually spreading across the world is that they fall less often than do authoritarian regimes.
- (4) A loyal single-party movement or an ethnic/religious/regional social group either of which is capable of penetrating civil society as agents of regime control. Examples here are single parties like the Baathists or the Tunisian RCD and distinct social groups like the Alawites in Syria or the Sunni of Bahrain, or the Al Saud tribe in Saudi Arabia or the Al Khalifa family in Bahrain. Through kinship ties, these create loyal patron-client networks spreading across the realm, whose participants share in the spoils of government. The problem here is that "in-groups" foster "out-groups" discontented at

being excluded from a share of the spoils, and potentially capable of oppositional collective organization, especially if this is made easier by a shared religious or ethnic identity. The clashing strategies of regime and opposition may thus result in deeper ethnic or religious polarization, in which people who had not previously thought that being a Shi'a or a Sunni, for example, was their primary identity, now feel forced to seek protection from their sectarian community, intensifying this identity. This is the path toward civil war and ethnic cleaning, which benefits neither regime nor opposition, since it invites foreign intervention to assist co-ethnics or co-religionists. I demonstrated this downward spiral of violence in my book on ethnic cleansing (Mann, 2005), and Syria is a recent example of this. This is a very dangerous strategy, capable of working in some situations but turning disastrous in others. In countries generally considered democracies we find an equivalent of this in “ethnocratic” policies whereby a majority ethnic or religious group has the force of numbers to guarantee victory in free elections. Then it can use laws to discriminate against the minority, as in Israel, for example.

- (5) A spoils system, a more general ability to redistribute resources toward one’s friends and away from one’s enemies, thereby buying support among strategic elites. The spoils of office have grown in the MENA countries in recent decades as neoliberal policies have privatized state enterprises, for regimes have distributed ownership to their friends and kin (Meijer, 2014). Such “corruption” is normal in non-democratic or half-democratic regimes (though some democracies, like the US have indirect forms of corruption, in which the parties’ paymasters can dictate policies). But corruption is often railed against from below. What is crucial is the breadth of the in-group coalition. If the spoils are distributed only within a narrow circle of regime family and friends, then not only the people but also excluded elites may be alienated. Advancing economic grievances, they denounce cronyism, nepotism, and corruption – and that is dangerous for the regime. This infrastructure guarantees security if it is broadly distributive. The regime needs considerable skill to maintain a balancing act between elites who can be truly relied on for loyalty and those more independent elites who, if disaffected, could do great damage to the regime. This is not an easy infrastructural task.
- (6) A revenue-gathering capacity which does not depend on the consent of the people. As indicated above, this has been important for despots throughout history. Some taxes are specialized and require little consent, like import and export taxes. Better still are revenues supposedly “belonging” to the regime. Revenue from oil and gas reserves is the major example of this in this region. Since the revenue belongs to the regime, it does not need to tax the people. The major spur to democratization in the West was taxation, the major slogan “no taxation without representation”. Since oil and gas revenues bypass this, the most powerful historical stimulus to democracy is absent. The Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria are the supreme example of this rentier state, though most states of the region can lessen the burden of taxation with some such rents. The problem here is mainly for the regimes who lack these resources.
- (7) Providing some social welfare for the people without making concessions to democracy. Using T.H. Marshall’s typology of citizenship in a way that he did not foresee, this involves granting social while withholding civil and political rights. I noted in a critique of Marshall (1987) that this was characteristic of authoritarian regimes like Wilhelmine Germany at the turn of the 20th century. But it is found in simpler forms throughout history. In the Middle East it is truly ancient. In the words of a Babylonian foundation

myth dating to the second millennium BCE, the gods gave the city of Babylon to a certain Marduk:

When they gave Marduk the kingship
They pronounced to him the formula
Of “Benefits and Obedience”:
“From this day forward you shall be
The provider of our sanctuaries
And whatever you order let us carry out.”

The authoritarian social contract then and now is benefits in return for obedience. But it is obviously far more penetrative in modern societies than was possible for earlier societies. In the MENA countries, under “Arab socialism” and Keynesian economics, it involved subsidies on essential commodities, expansion of jobs in the public sector, and more spending on education, health, housing and other social services. This was a substantial dose of social citizenship conferred on most males, often including ethnic and religious minorities. However, it generally excluded women, who had to receive benefits through the male household head, making this a patriarchal form of social citizenship. In contrast civil and political rights were denied to the people, especially to women who are still considered legal minors in most countries, whose labor force rate of participation is the lowest of any region, and who also have the lowest proportion among parliamentarians (Springborg, 2007).

Thus overall the MENA peoples are more subjects than citizens. Citizen rights are for the most part an ideal to struggle toward, not actuality. Turner (1989; cf Meijer 2014) aptly termed this “passive citizenship”, but Turner thought that the concept had the defect of neglecting social struggles as the central motor of citizenship. No: this contract was an attempt by regimes frightened by stirrings from below to head off insurrection at the pass. Regimes responded to discontent by yielding some passive citizenship to calm it down. For a time, it worked, costly as it was. But the combined fiscal consequence of infrastructures 1, 2, and 7 was very high government expenditures, higher as a proportion of GDP than in any other region of the world (Springborg, 2007). This was fiscally dangerous since there was little to spare for public investment in the economy, while the level of corruption deterred investment by foreign capital except for very short-term speculation. The economies were being starved of investment, preventing economic growth (Achcar, 2013).

Indeed the social contract wavered in the 1970s as government deficits in the neoliberal era led to austerity policies. Government budgets were cut, as were subsidies. This led to economic exclusion, impoverishment, and the marginalization of the growing lower-middle classes than in most other regions of the world (Meijer, 2014). There were so-called “bread riots” in the late 1970s and the 1980s costing hundreds of lives. Had the Arab Spring happened in the 1980s we would likely have attributed it to this alone. Subsequent decades saw some stabilization, though this was accompanied and potentially undermined by growing inequality. Much of this resulted from privatization, accompanied by increasing corruption, weakening the legitimacy of authoritarianism. Economic demands came to the fore. But in oil or natural gas rich states much of the sense of betrayal might still be undercut by ample revenue distributed among the people.

(8)The final policy stretches the term “infrastructure” beyond its normal remit. It is the cultivation of foreign alliances so that aid in any perilous situation might be forthcoming from other powers or organizations. Obviously, the US has been the most important power, capable of providing substantial loans, armaments, and military intervention, overt or covert. Since the Middle East and oil are highly strategic, authoritarian regimes which preserve order can still depend on much more support from the US than can regimes in most of the rest of the world – provided the regime does what the US wants. But neighboring, co-religious, or co-ethnic states can also lend support to the regime or the opposition – and even NGOs like Hezbollah can be important. Given that the region is a geopolitical maze, considerable diplomatic skill is important here. Alliances must be chosen with care.

These authoritarian infrastructures are aimed at controlling the people in general by maintaining the cohesion of regime supporters across the realm while dividing-and-ruling among elites and the masses. Where political parties are allowed some freedoms the regime will seek to divide-and-rule amongst them too, as in Jordan and Morocco. The multiple opposition parties are deterred from forming a single coalition by the knowledge that the regime would then repress them. More dangerous is any increase in factionalism inside the regime. This can potentially lead to coup attempts or regional revolts and it will lead to uprisings if a substantial opposition movement is also present. The level of vulnerability of the ruling regime is the most important predictor of outcomes, since perceived weakness will embolden opposition. This follows from my argument that a repressed people will revolt if they can.

In the sociological literature on revolutions the most vulnerable regimes (apart from those discredited in war) are personalist, exclusionary, and internally factionalized. **Personalist** refers to a single ruler possessed of arbitrary powers. “Sultanism” is the term often used in the MENA zone, alongside “patrimonialism” or “neo-patrimonialism”. Among these cases, and less frequently among other regimes, rulers come to distrust some elite groups as “over-mighty subjects” and so they can develop three alternative policies. First, the ruler may attempt to divide-and-rule among elites, switching his preferred alliances whenever one elite group seems to become too powerful. This, however, tends to produce **factionalism** within the regime. Second he may narrow the support base of their regime to a limited set of elite groups on whose loyalty he can count. These may be reduced down to a circle of friends and kin. But this is also dangerous since it involves the **exclusion** of many elites from a share in the power and the spoils of office, which alienates them and produces elite support for opposition movements. This invokes infrastructure weaknesses numbers 4 and 5 of my list. Polity scores which are frequently evoked to explain outcomes are not a good measure of exclusion. Right across MENA the masses are excluded from a share in power. But the extent to which elites are excluded varies and their support for the regime matters far more than that of the people as a whole. Third, most personalist rulers distrust the armed forces who have the power to overthrow them. So they divide-and-rule among the generals and turn more to the security police or to a specialized Praetorian Guard for protection. This was so, for example, of the Shah of Iran who by refusing to allow a unified High Command unintentionally weakened the army’s ability to take collective action against the enormous popular demonstrations of 1978 and 1979. He relied on the security police, the SAVAK, but it was too small and poorly-armed to cope with such large-scale protests (Kandil, 2012a). This revealed infrastructural weakness number 2.

All these weaknesses also reduce the legitimacy of the ruler (number 3) and force him into heightening repression, which then de-legitimizes him further. This is not to deny the importance of pro-insurrectionary forces to the outcome. But I suggest that almost whatever the strength of the popular opposition, if the regime stays cohesive, broad-based among elites, and in control of repressive force, it will outlast the storm. Using this infrastructural model I turn to explaining between-country variance in the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring

Many general causes have been suggested for the Arab Spring, but these must also help explain why actions and outcomes were so varied across the region. In a quantitative comparative analysis of the regimes Byun and Hollander (2012) tested whether a series of likely causes were correlated with the different levels of unrest found in sixteen MENA countries. They found more unrest in countries with higher corruption and inequality levels, but not in countries with higher unemployment or inflation, nor with a higher proportion of young people, nor with more internet connectivity or social media penetration. Easily leading the way on Twitter were Saudis but they did not revolt. Even corruption and inequality did not explain much of the variance, but that may be due to problems with their measures. Beck (2011) also finds no correlation with demographic pressure and he adds that GDP growth in the few years prior to the Spring was unrelated to unrest. Nor did “Polity” democracy scores correlate with unrest, though there was not a lot of variation here. Beck also finds a slight relationship to the presence of many INGOs (which he uses as a measure of connection to John Meyer’s “world polity”), and to a prior history of contention and repression since 1980.

But most of these background factors were very widely shared across MENA. They almost all had demographic bulges of young and educated people, much corruption, and al-Jazeera, while most had high unemployment, severe poverty, and unbalanced economies. Obviously this was an important factor everywhere in lowering the rational-legal authority of the regime, but it does not explain why considerable agitation occurred in some countries and not others. The Saudi economy took a hit, but there were almost no protests. And despite these economic difficulties, most MENA countries had seen substantial progress since 1970. They had increased life expectancy, education levels, and higher Human Development Index scores, and they had recently shifted away from neoliberalism to counter-cyclical spending (see Mouhoud, 2012, on the North African countries). So might the “J-curve” theory of revolution help? This sees revolution as a response to a sudden reversal in fortune after a long period of economic growth, which produces a sense of relative deprivation. This works for a few but not most revolutions. Here, however, there was no downturn before January 2011. Overall, explanations which relate the varied struggles of the Arab Spring to broad social and economic conditions do not work well.

Between-country correlations like those just mentioned are also unsuited to explain waves, since they assume that the cases covered are independent of one another. Tunisia should not be considered as a country equivalent to any other. As the initiator of action, influencing all the others, it was far more important than the others. Without swift Tunisian success there might have been no further uprisings. Tunisian success deeply affected the second explosion, in Egypt,

which was also initially successful. And so others followed, emboldened, rushing into the streets to demonstrate without much forethought even in unpropitious contexts. The regimes were now panicking but also considering their counter-tactics. Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Algeria and Jordan sought to defuse protests with subsidies or promises of reform. This seemed successful, though we cannot be sure whether the protests would have died away without such inducements. We must also consider the weakening of regimes by foreign interventions, which inflicted NATO bombing on Libya, Saudi forces on Bahrain, diverse interferences in Syria, and Western pressure on the Yemeni President – plus the legacy of U.S. intervention in Iraq, and subsequent U.S. covert operations. Without these decisions by foreigners, some outcomes would likely have been different. So all these three factors -- the wave effect, tactical interactions, and outsider interference -- stymy simple comparative correlations and make broad generalizations difficult.

A case-study approach, however, (drawing on Beck & Hueser, 2012) reveals the importance of the authoritarian infrastructures listed above. First, autonomous sources of revenue, which here means mainly oil and natural gas revenues, were very important. Only Libya among the seven major producers experienced major demonstrations. In Saudi Arabia and Algeria both the carrot and the stick of the authoritarian contract were strengthened with ample oil revenues -- subsidies and wages were raised but so was spending on security and intelligence directorates. The oil producing exception, Libya, can be explained in terms of other infrastructures. The Libyan regime had narrowed to the family and tribal associates of Gaddafi. The east of the country was excluded from the regime and its spoils, and it was the east that led the uprising. Gadaffi could not expect help from abroad, having alienated just about all foreign powers who counted. Indeed it was NATO bombing which finished him off, averting what might have been either a prolonged civil war or ferocious regime repression. The other oil producers experienced only small or no protests, were valued by the US and Europe, and their regimes could respond to the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings by showering oil revenues on their people. Regimes and their alliances were nourished by oil and gas.

But strong cohesion protected regimes. Morocco and Jordan were not oil or natural gas producers but they had broad-based regimes. They were already more liberal than most regimes and they perhaps forestalled an uprising by promising further liberalization (delivery on the promises lags so far). Regimes with narrower bases felt more threatened. Bahrain was not a major oil producer, but it was ruled by a Sunni minority and excluded most of the Shi'a, the large majority of the population. As in Libya it was the excluded, in this case the Shi'a, who revolted and though the Sunni army stayed loyal, it needed extra help from Sunni Saudi troops to repress them. In Syria the minority Alawite community, especially dominating the armed forces, were fiercely loyal to the Assad regime, since the community feared reprisals if the Sunni-led revolution succeeded. Since both sides could draw on important foreign support, a civil war resulted. As Islamists became seemingly the most effective rebel fighters, many more secular Syrians were alienated and deserted the rebel cause. It seems that after a terrible civil war Assad will still be in power.

Regimes were overthrown in four countries, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya, while the Bahreini regime tottered until saved by Saudi troops. They had all seen a narrowing of the regime's alliance with elites. In Tunisia and Egypt corruption had intensified over the decades, boosted by neoliberal privatizations. In Egypt formerly state corporations were given to Gamal

Mubarak, son of the President and big businessman, and to the circle of entrepreneurs around him. In Tunisia they were given to the Presidential families, the Ben Ali and the Trabelsi. In Bahrain the Al Khalifa family received most of the oil revenue and of the lands reclaimed from the sea. In Libya Gaddafi's sons accrued enormous wealth as did the family of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Both these two countries also filled the top military and security police positions with close kin, narrowing their base of support. Of course, there may be a selection bias here. Deposed leaders have their corruption exposed, whereas with surviving leaders the evidence is often only rumor.

Moreover, none of these four countries had monarchies and corruption became entangled with succession crises. All four had elderly leaders believed to be trying to manoeuvre their corrupt offspring into succeeding them (though in Tunisia it was unclear whether Ben Ali was favoring most his son or his son-in-law or even his wife). This caused disaffection among in-groups, narrowing the elite support base as well as tarring their rule with corruption (Lust, 2011; Owen, 2012). The consequence was an oppositional alliance between those who in good faith denounced corruption and those who wanted a share of it. In Egypt the latter included the army who were getting less of the spoils than formerly and who hated Gamal Mubarak in particular (Kandil, 2012b); in the Yemen the losers were tribal factions (including military officers) who had been excluded from the spoils; in Tunisia the army as a whole was alienated; in Libya Cyrenaicans were. There is strong evidence, says Hale (2013: 346) "that elite defections, competition, or bet-hedging linked to anticipated succession created conditions crucial to the cascade of protest and revolution engulfing some countries and not others."

Of course, ultimately the military decided the outcome of those uprisings which did occur. In Tunisia the small and hitherto apolitical army had come to hate Ben Ali and refused to help him out. Generals even threatened to fire on his security police. In Egypt a large but alienated army also stood aside rather than back Mubarak. Later the army acted ruthlessly against the Muslim Brotherhood and imposed its own authoritarian rule. In Yemen the army split along tribal and regional lines and a civil war loomed, which was when President Saleh was pressured by the U.S. and some of his own supporters to step down. In Libya the armed forces also split. Gaddafi had built up extensive paramilitaries led by his sons, and he had also purchased foreign mercenary units, while neglecting the army. The army split along tribal and regional lines and a civil war was decided by NATO forces. These were all examples of fissures in the "deep state", weakening its infrastructural solidity. But all the other armed forces stood by the ruling regime, which intimidated the small reform movements which emerged. As in most waves the initial uprising was more successful than the late-comers.

This discussion reveals the usefulness of my model of authoritarian infrastructures and their strengths and weaknesses. Note that I have given a largely top-down explanation of the Arab Spring. Obviously, nothing would have happened without popular uprisings. But elites and armies were decisive partly because the protest movements were quite weak. The neoliberal period had seen some political liberalization, and there had been a longer-lasting growth in civil society organizations in most MENA countries, some of which demanded more civil and political rights. Judiciaries had become a little more independent, partly because the desired foreign investors valued the rule of law. Islamists also began to favor a more active conception of citizenship. Alliances between labor, liberals, and even sometimes Islamists became more

common (Meijer, 2014). Labor union organization was particularly marked in Tunisia and Egypt. Professional associations were also stirring and this combination provided the Arab Spring with student, union and middle class support. This was especially marked in Tunisia and it encouraged large-scale demonstrations. Yet the fervency of protest in the streets took political oppositional organizations by surprise and events span out of their control. There were political parties in some countries but they lacked authority and were bypassed (except for the Muslim Brotherhood), although their youth movements were sometimes more active.

The enthusiasm and commitment of the demonstrators was there on television screens for the world to see. The slogans for human dignity, equality before the law, freedom, and social justice clearly amounted to a demand for more active citizenship, involving all three kinds of citizen rights. They were often aimed at a political revolution, revealed clearly in the most popular chant of the Spring “the people demand the overthrow of the regime”. This resonated throughout the oppressed populations of the MENA countries. This was how the Spring started. The size of the protests in Tunisia and Egypt did matter and this was undoubtedly a factor in the reluctance of their militaries to intervene – though the Egyptian military later took on the Muslim Brotherhood mass movement. In Libya and Syria there were mass street demonstrations but they gave way to paramilitaries once it was clear a civil war was beginning. In Yemen they were tribally dominated. But these movements lacked coherence of organization, goals and discipline. They were protest movements of mainly young people, including more than a sprinkling of women, who had relatively little contact with already existing oppositional parties. They dominated the insurgency, but where elections resulted, these groups were poorly organized and so had little electoral impact, while oppositional parties which were electorally organized were factionalized.

In these events there was no equivalent to the committed ideology and vision of the future possessed by communists or fascists in the 20th century. The Islamists were the closest to this but over three decades they had been making compromises with the regime and they were taken by surprise. When they did come to power in Egypt their attempts at radical reform alienated much of the country which then stood aside (often applauding) as the Islamists were victimized by the army. The constitutional reformers almost everywhere formed many parties and factions. They lacked an agreed political program, and they lacked leaders with the authority to develop strategies in pursuit of definite goals. There were no revolutionary elites in the Arab Spring.

There was a further problem, and one that still endures. The people were divided – between Shi'a and Sunni, between seculars and Islamists, between different tribal, clan, and regional interest groups. These divisions either prevented collective action in the first place or, more often, were exacerbated by polarizing events and a deliberate regime strategy of playing the ethnic/religious card. In Tunisia alone has there been a degree of collective solidarity which has protected the gains of the uprising, and this has included the major Islamist party. In Egypt the revolution was aborted by divisions between secular and Islamist reformers which the army was able to exploit to effect an actual electoral majority in favor of military rule. Here the fear of chaos seems to have been primary for Egyptians – who had already experienced some of it. In Syria there is still a three-way civil war: Alawite regime versus secular rebel Sunnis versus Islamist Sunni rebels – all receiving help from abroad. In Yemen there remain tribal and regional divides with al-Qaeda also an active presence. Little of consequence has occurred in the other countries because the regime is much stronger than the protesters.

This is regrettably a fairly pessimistic analysis. In 2011, active citizenship, democratic aspirations, and popular collective action made a would-be revolutionary or reformist comeback, but they failed, except in Tunisia. Once again in a revolutionary wave, only the first case was successful. Nevertheless the Arab Spring revealed widespread discontent and protest and this will not go away in the region. Indeed it will be encouraged if Tunisian success continues, if the recession worsens, and if the price of oil declines – which would threaten the rentier states as well. But it is likely that intra-elite struggles and military power will continue to decide outcomes in the near future. It is a challenge for MENA regimes to get right the infrastructural balancing act between finding loyal elites and broad elites. They must also manage what Kandil (2012a) calls the “triangle of power” between itself, the army, and the security police. Their authoritarian rule, their mistakes, and the broad structural tendencies of the countries will doubtless produce further uprisings on the streets. The literature on civil wars has shown that the best predictor of an uprising is a previous uprising (Fearon and Laitin, 2003). That was also the case in 2011. There will be more insurgencies. But as long as political elites manage to keep intact their infrastructural advantages, and specifically to remain more cohesive and goal-oriented than popular movements and keep the “deep state” intact, the prospects for revolution or indeed for much reform are dim. Moreover, most people in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Egypt must now be actually regretting their uprisings. Life under Assad, Gadaffi, Saddam Hussein, and Mubarak must on reflection seem better than today’s violence and chaos. The Arab Spring may have reinforced the fear of major change. Gradual reformism must seem preferable and that also characterized the growth of citizenship in the West. But this is the long haul. At the moment authoritarian regimes remain well-entrenched in the Middle East and North Africa.

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