Between Expectations and Reality: The Arab Spring in Egypt

Abstract

This paper analyses the causes that have sparked the Arab Spring, stressing the impact of the common political, economic and social issues in spreading the uprisings throughout the entire region. It will then proceed to examine the case study of Egypt and to offer an historical comparison that will enable the reader to understand the cyclic dynamics of the Egyptian events, and to recognise the dangers of the present situation. The analysis of the Egyptian uprisings will thus permit me to identify the future challenges for a successful transition to democracy, summarised in the four conclusive points.

Hunger for Democracy?

Three years have passed since that fatal day in December 2010, when an unknown Tunisian street vendor named Mohamed Bouzazi set himself on fire in a desperate act of self-immolation against the authoritarian and despotic power of the Tunisian police forces. Nobody could have predicted that such an isolated gesture would have so quickly crossed the Tunisian national borders to then trigger a series of events destined to upset the entire Middle East. A subsequent, overwhelming wave of protests and revolutionary movements developed in Tunisia first, and progressively throughout the whole region, transforming the features of countries that just some time before seemed condemned to maintain a stagnant, passive status quo. To understand the impact of such movements even outside the region, one could simply think about the fact that, three years later, the Middle East is still the centre of political, economic and sociological debates, and that the causes and outcomes of the protests are still being discussed among the international community.

The so-called Arab Spring, a term coined in reference to other uprising movements carried out in Prague in 1968, or earlier in Europe during the 19th century, has erupted throughout the entire region, toppling governments in Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Tunisia, and shaking many others, thus giving evidence that Mohamed Bouzazi was not alone in his indignation, as the now notorious slogan “…We are all Bouazizis…” suggests. The Arab Spring has shown how the people in the Middle East had started sharing

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something beyond their language and religion. Indeed, they started sharing a common feeling of frustration towards their political and socio-economic system, towards in fact their own existence, thus beginning a long journey for freedom, equal rights, political participation and economic justice. Three years after the beginning of the revolts, the assertion that the Arab Spring is not a uniform phenomenon is largely shared, and rightfully so. Differently from other historically relevant uprisings, such as for instance those of the former Soviet bloc, from which the Arab Spring has romantically borrowed its name, the Arab countries do not belong to a consolidated and institutionalised empire, but are autonomous entities that share at most some transnational common features. This key characteristic emerges clearly from the analysis of the Arab Spring itself, as, the uprisings have propagated, impacted and produced effects in different ways among the various Arab countries. It would thus be quite erroneous to examine the effects of these revolutionary movements through a large ‘regional’ lens, as the result would hardly be able to reflect a truthful representation of the specific dynamics taking place in each Arab state. Although the Middle East is often treated as a single reality, especially in global geo-political analysis, the specificity of the local societies and institutions differs from country to country, and therefore requires a much more contextualised approach, at least when it comes to the analysis of the consequences of the phenomenon. In fact, what is very fascinating about the Arab uprisings is that while the effects produced are multi-directional, the original causes appeared from the start to be transnational. It could actually be safely affirmed that the very nature of these revolutionary movements was forged upon the friction between a strong and transnational impulse towards an idealist democratic ambition, and the presence of constraining and preventing forces whose main features were identical in each country.

The democratic ambition of the Arab people is far from being a mere ‘Westernised’ intellectual assumption, nor should some recent developments induce us to believe that this is actually the case: the original pulse was indeed a democratic one. In 2011, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) published a report, in which it showed that, among the respondents in all the surveyed countries, a large majority considered a Democratic system “…better than other systems”. The Arab idea of democracy is not very different from ours, as it is founded upon principles that all of us can recognise to be the fundamentals for any democratic system: guarantee of freedom, civil and political rights, justice and equality, and a democratic system of government, thus legitimized by the people, with the distribution of power

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and political pluralism guaranteed, an improving economic situation, social security
and stability.

While keeping in mind, as mentioned above, that each Arab country is different in
its history, traditions, political and economic systems, such a shared ‘pulse’ towards
democracy has been originated from another shared element among the Arab countries,
which is the heightened, long-lasting discontent with the systems of power. A study
conducted in 2004 by the United Nations Development Programme has shown that
there are indeed some affinities between the systems of governance adopted in the
Arab countries, and it is simple common sense to note that such features collide
with the idea of democracy described above: a strongly centralised head of state,
absence of political pluralism, lack of legitimacy (often self-given through the so
called ‘Legitimacy of Blackmail’), strong barriers to participation to the political life
of the country, economic corruption and social repression.  

The tension, or friction, between unfulfilled democratic ambitions and anti-
democratic regimes emerges clearly through the analysis of some of the major
countries where the Arab Spring has erupted. Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya, just
to name a few, branded themselves with the name of Republics, while in truth there
was nothing ‘republican’, in the Latin acceptation of the word, about them. The
power held by leaders such as Ben Ali, Mubarak, and Gaddafi was indeed so absolute
and totalitarian that, as Hichem Karoui suggests, it would be more appropriate to
describe them as ‘monarchical republics’, nothing more than tyrannous regimes.
No political pluralism, no representation, no participation in the political life:
no “res publica”, in fact. It is, in a very simple way, a clear manifestation of a government,
or an entire political system, that fails its own people.

Why now? Tricks and triggers behind the Spring

Beyond the democratic ambitions of the Arab world, there are at least three factors
that have triggered the Arab Spring and brought the region to witness such a rapid
and contagious diffusion of the revolts. The economic troubles, the social issues
and the role of the new media, are the three key elements to analyse in order to
obtain a better understanding of the events.

First of all, it should be pointed out that uprisings in the Middle East are nothing
new. Throughout its contemporary history the region has experienced an impressive
number of more or less radical protests, coups d’état and vicissitudes in general,
which have certainly played a role in shaping the Middle East as we know it today.
However, from an historical perception, it is immediately notable that the nature of
these revolutionary movements has changed. After the Second World War, and for a
vast lapse of time, the Arab discontent was connected to the tragic inheritance left
by the colonial era and to the creation of Israel. Back then, many of the problems,

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5 H.H. Karoui, ‘Arab Spring, The New Middle East in the Making’, *Middle East Studies Online
whether being political or economic, were perceived as a direct consequence of the imperialist exploitations carried out first by the European empires, and later by the United States, which eventually favoured the emergence of the nationalist movements and the recurrent waves of Nasserism throughout the entire region. Conversely, as Michael S. Duran rightfully argues, today “…people see the problem as home-grown”.  

Although it would be highly inaccurate to say that the Arab world has a good perception of certain international actors, especially given the fact that the United States and Israel are considered by a vast majority of the Arab population to be the main threats to their countries, the basis of the current uprisings is exclusively a matter of internal discontent with the political and socio-economic system of those countries. Nevertheless, the impressive longevity of the dictatorial regimes toppled by the Arab Spring uprisings (Ben Ali had been in power from 1987 to 2011, Mubarak from 1981 to 2011 and Gaddafi extraordinarily from 1961 to 2011) should at least make us wonder: why now?

First and foremost, it is important to specify that such discontent should not be seen as a strictly exclusive trend originating from the Arab Spring phenomenon. Although the Middle East has never before witnessed such a dramatic wave of protests as is being witnessed today, this is not the first time that an aversion towards an Arab regime has been disclosed – a clear reflection of the fact that the Arab world has nursed its discomfort for a long time. For instance, the uprising in Egypt has been in the making from as early as 2000, when, after the Second Intifada, thousands of Egyptians took to the streets, first in an act of solidarity towards the Palestinians, then in an act of protest against Mubarak’s regime. In 2003, and again in 2004, new pro-Palestinians and anti-war demonstrations turned into anti-Mubarak riots with people taking to the streets once more and “…burning down Mubarak’s billboard”. Strikes took place in Egypt from 2006 onwards, and in 2008 an actual movement, called the “April 6 Youth” emerged through Facebook in support of the strike of workers in El-Mahalla El-Kubra. Even in Tunisia, the malcontent with Ben Ali’s regime is not exclusive to 2010, as protests against the exploitations of the bureaucratic apparatus had already taken place in 2008, with hundreds of people demanding better work conditions and less corruption. It would therefore be misleading to think that the Arab uprising started in December 2010. Nonetheless, as mentioned above, there are three elements today, three common causes that have helped the emergence and persistence of these uprisings.

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propagation of the Arab Spring uprisings in this specific time, namely the economic troubles, the ‘youth bulge’ phenomenon\textsuperscript{10} and consequent unemployment issue, and the role of the new media.

The political exasperation, caused by the friction between democratic ambitions and constraining forces, rightfully occupies a primary position in the analysis; however, this exasperation cannot be the only reason behind the explosion of the Arab uprisings. In fact, the term ‘exasperation’ itself implies not a sudden, but rather a gradual generation of the feeling of aversion. Thus the eruption takes place whenever the limit is reached and when certain mechanisms are set in motion. This is why, next to the broad argument of the political framework, the analysis of the triggers of the Arab Spring, which could be described in general terms as economic and social factors, shows its importance: what are these mechanisms that have been set in motion, subsequently triggering the uprisings?

ACRPS’s 2011 survey has brought to light some rather significant data, which provides a good starting point for such analysis: the majority of Arabs linked the toppling of both Ben Ali and Mubarak to the deteriorating economic situation of their countries.\textsuperscript{11}

The economic condition of these countries, powerfully symbolised by Bouzazi’s confiscated wares, is indeed a pivotal cause to understand the origin of the Arab Spring. As Suzanne Maloney argues, despite “…its traditional place in international commerce, an unrivalled resource base, and a vast young labour market…”,\textsuperscript{12} the economy of the countries in the region has been highly disappointing: corruption, unequal wealth distribution, subsidized and unproductive non-oil sectors and an ‘impressive’ unemployment, are some of the causes of a very “worrisome” situation, as Stephen Glain has argued.\textsuperscript{13} In Egypt, for instance, the stagnation of the economy has forced half of the population to live on just $2 per day, perhaps even less.\textsuperscript{14} In the last few years, the Tunisian GNI per capita was oscillating between $6,000 and $8,000,\textsuperscript{15} a rather worrisome figure if we compare it to United States GNI per capita during the same timeframe, somewhere in between $47,000 and $50,000.\textsuperscript{16} As such, despite the promises of a ‘better life’ that arose through the propaganda of these leaders, promises of reforms, liberalization and a general growth of the economy,

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\textsuperscript{10} The Youth Bulge is a phenomenon that occurs when to a growing fertility and lowering rate of mortality follow a lowering rate of both fertility and mortality, which results in an increase of the number of young people.

\textsuperscript{11} ‘The Arab Opinion Project…’, p. 28.


\textsuperscript{15} The World Data Bank: \url{http://data.worldbank.org/country/tunisia} (accessed 17.10.2013).

the majority of the people were, in fact, living in poverty. To some, this is the real reason behind the Arab uprisings. It is not merely a matter of poverty per se, it is a matter of extremely disappointing achievements: “the growing gap in expectations of a better life and a more modest reality… sparks the revolution”.\(^{17}\)

Let us take the case of Egypt. After the highly controversial 2005 elections, Mubarak, according to the US State Department, “…simplified and reduced tariffs and taxes, improved the transparency of the national budget, revived stalled privatizations of public enterprises and implemented economic legislation designed to foster private sector-driven economic growth and improve Egypt’s competitiveness”.\(^{18}\) These measures did improve the GDP growth of 7% between 2005 and 2008 and did manage to bring some benefits to the economy of the country. Nevertheless, as David Schenker argues, while there was a sort of economic improvement, this was merely “…in a wider sense…” and, as he continues, “Your average Egyptian guy on the street did not see”\(^{19}\) any benefit.

Therefore, the rampant corruption, high inflation and a very poor welfare system excluded the population from the ‘economic achievements’ of Mubarak. It also exacerbated and further unveiled the wide gap between the State-apparatus and the population. While a rather small part of the population was reaping and enjoying the benefits of Mubarak’s liberalizations, an alienated vast majority was condemned to poverty.

The global economic crisis was the icing on the cake. Although these countries, being somehow shielded because of their closed financial system, managed to survive the direct impact of the crisis, they did not survive the consequences of the economic recessions in other countries: being strongly linked with Europe, both Egypt and Tunisia, among others, “…have reported sharp declines in their exports of agricultural and manufactured products in 2009”.\(^ {20}\) This exponentially worsened the living standards of the majority of the Arab population, and thus triggered the uprisings. However, it is important to highlight the fact that the global economic crisis was not the direct cause of the Arab Spring. Poverty and malcontent characterised the Arab countries even prior to the global crisis, which therefore had the sole role of exacerbating an already rather unstable situation and precarious balance.

Two more causes can be identified to answer the question raised of why the uprisings occurred when they did, both interwove with each other and with the economic situation described above. The first one concerns the fact that, from the 1950s to the present day, the countries of the Middle East have experienced an impressive population growth, 2% to 3% a year in contrast to the 1.2% a year of the

\(^{17}\) Pollack, The Arab Awakening…, p. 68.


\(^{19}\) Ibidem.

world. The decline of child mortality and an increased rate of fertility have brought these countries to witness first an increase in the proportion of children, and then, with a subsequent slowing decline of fertility, to experience a significant increase of the youth, aged 15 to 24 – a phenomenon known as “youth bulge”.21 As Suzanne Maloney sums up, “Approximately two-thirds of the population of the region is under the age of thirty…”22, and the youth now constitutes one-third of the working-age population in the Middle East region.23

This data becomes particularly alarming when it gets cross-referenced with the unemployment rate. According to Masood Ahmed, Director of the Middle East and Central Asia Department of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the rate of unemployment in the MENA regions “…is the highest in the world… and largely a youth phenomenon”24, with figures of youth unemployment that oscillate between 25% and 32%25 and have continued to increase over the past few years.

From the analysis of these figures, an immediate result can be noted: the Middle East is a region of young, unemployed people. The anger of the youth therefore lies within both political and economic spheres: the political system, static, authoritarian and corrupted; the economic system, unequal, stagnant and generally unable to offer any prospects for the future.

One last, fascinating reason should be highlighted, and again, it is strongly associated with the first two. The new media, particularly the very popular social networks such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, have certainly played an important role during the Arab uprising, at least for the rapidity with which they helped to spread the first news of the Tunisian unrest, hence activating the domino effect throughout the Middle East, and for the level of exposure they have given to the entire Arab Spring and consequently to the Arab regimes among the international community. Several analysts, perhaps in a wave of enthusiasm, have gone even further, as they have attributed a pre-eminent role in causing the Arab Spring to facilitate the use of social media. This is open to debate. However, there are some elements of connection between the political and economic crisis of the countries in the Middle East, the youth malcontent and these new media, which cannot be ignored. The first obvious

consideration lies with the fact that these new channels are usually accessed by the youth – the same angry, unemployed youth as described above. In today’s globalised world, the Arab youth became “…acutely aware of their relative deprivation and understood there existed alternatives to the repressive governments under which they lived”. 26 Secondly, they have allowed a rapid and public diffusion of certain events (including Bouzazi’s self-immolation, as well as other rather shocking episodes, such as Khaled Said’s homicide), which would have otherwise been kept ‘private’. It is difficult to imagine that these stories would have spread so effortlessly and had such an overwhelming impact without this widespread publication on the internet. Thirdly, it helped the mobilization: people took over the squares often after being summoned through a quick exchange of information through social media platforms. The new media also helped in exposing the level of corruption of the leaders of the Arab regimes, as the story of Tunisian Blogger “Astrubal” indicates27, not only among the Arab population but among the West as well, placing these authoritarian regimes “…to a new level of scrutiny”. 28 Finally, WikiLeaks; one can only imagine the level of frustration of the Arab people when the notorious website leaked the cables of the former American ambassador in Tunisia, Robert F. Godec, where he stated “President Ben Ali is aging, his regime is sclerotic and there is no clear successor… Many Tunisians are frustrated by the lack of political freedom and angered by First Family corruption, high unemployment and regional inequities…”, adding that “Major change in Tunisia will have to wait for Ben Ali’s departure”. 29 However, the exhausted Tunisian youth did not wait for Ben Ali’s departure. It prompted his departure.

The same sort of incident happened with the former American ambassador in Egypt, Margaret Scobey, as already in 2009 she had revealed in a secret cable: “The next presidential elections are scheduled for 2011 and if Mubarak is still alive it is likely he will run again and, inevitably, win”. 30 When on the 9th of December 2010 the British newspaper The Guardian reported that “…Scobey’s candid view, in a cable dated May 2009, is that Mubarak… is most likely to die in office rather than step down voluntarily or be replaced in a plausible democratic vote”31, it made the news accessible to anyone. For a population seeking political pluralism, representation

27 Astrubal recorded the misuses of public funds and the regime’s opulent living, exposing to the public evidences of, for example, the illegitimate use of the presidential jet. Pollack, The Arab Awakening…, p. 42.
28 Ibid., p. 43.
and participation in political life, the apparent endless regime of Mubarak represented the very demons it was fighting against, and therefore had to come to an end.

There are at least three reasons that can justify the profound impact that the public disclosure of the contents of these secret documents had among the Arab population. First of all, they unveiled the international discontent with the situation in the Arab countries: Godec’s cable, for instance, reads “By many measures, Tunisia should be a close US ally. But it is not”32, thus indicating that the high corruption of the Ben Ali regime and the impossibility of implementing reforms, were jeopardising the relationship with the United States government. This is not to say that the average Tunisian youngster perceived the dissolving friendship between US and Tunisia as a central issue, directly influencing the quality of its life, but more simply that it somehow made definite and unequivocal the fact that the country was corrupted and had severe political, social and economic problems which were seemingly recognised abroad. Secondly, they included predictions of the future political and socio-economic situation of the countries: Godec’s cable states “Major change in Tunisia will have to wait for Ben Ali’s departure…”33, and Scobey’s reads “…Mubarak will likely resist further economic reform if he views it as potentially harmful…”34, bringing to mind a rather dramatic scenario, with the countries doomed to a static and unevolved status quo. The third and final point is that the cables considered the change. It is easy to imagine that, for a population that has lived for decades under the same dictatorship, the word ‘change’ might sound utopian. Nonetheless, the change was indeed considered abroad, if not envisaged.

A change did in fact occur. As mentioned above, the wave of the Arab Spring eventually brought with it the toppling of these regimes, and the beginning of a process of transformation, initially called democratization, particularly in western intellectual circles. Nevertheless, the extension and outcomes of these revolutionary movements are still, even now, highly unpredictable and uncertain. Much has happened during the past three years, and the ups and downs of the struggle suggest at least that the phenomenon of the Arab Spring is far from being a mere ‘revolution’ with short-term results, in the style for instance of the Berlin wall fall, but rather that it is more a matter of very long-term dynamics and adjustments.

Furthermore, while it has been possible to examine some general common causes for the eruption of this public outcry, or at least for what concerns the driving force behind the population’s unrest, it would be virtually impossible to predict their results. The Arab Spring is not a uniform phenomenon, and while there have been some common elements and aspirations behind the origin of the uprisings, its impact among the Arab countries is very heterogeneous. This inevitably inhibits one from drawing the general conclusion that we are witnessing a wave of democratization throughout

31 Ibidem.
32 ‘US Embassy Cables: Tunisia…’.
33 Ibidem.
34 Tisdall, ‘WikiLeaks Cables cast Hosni Mubarak…’.
the entire Middle East. On the contrary, it is mandatory to differentiate between the
countries hit by the Arab Spring, and only by doing so is it possible to see that for
some countries, this might well be the beginning of an even darker age. Indeed, the
story of Egypt tells us very much so.

**Important lessons from the past: The case of Egypt**

Whether because it is has a population of more than 80 million Arabs, its historical
pre-eminence, or because of its central role in the Middle East, the uprisings in
Egypt were followed with particular excitement and concern both in the Arab world
and among the international community, and were seen by many as a pivotal test for
the success or failure of the democratic wave across the region.

However, for those who, in the classic Arab Spring-wave of enthusiasm related to
the quick toppling of Mubarak, were ready to bet on the triumph of ‘democracy’ in
Egypt, the events that followed the 3rd of July 2013 might come as a dampening of the
spirits. The military coup that overthrew the Morsi government, in spite of whichever
way one might wish to describe it or portray it, was indeed a military coup, and in no
way could it result in the full establishment of a democratic system. Rather, it is
arguable that Egypt is in fact moving to the very opposite side, which appears to be the
firm establishment of a military dictatorship, whose similarities with past regimes gives
us cause to believe that it may even last for a long time. But let us proceed with order.

Egypt has been under the rule of Hosni Mubarak, former Chief Commander of the
Egyptian Air Force since 1981, after the assassination on Anwar al-Sadat occurred
on the 6th of October of the same year. Without digging into a long, detailed analysis
of his thirty-year long presidential career, a few key aspects of his regime are
noteworthy. The first one regards the fact that, for a very long time, Mubarak has
been a very precious ally for the United States in the Middle East. Washington vastly
benefited from good relations with Cairo especially concerning its interests in ensuring
the stability of the region: under Mubarak, Egypt collaborated with the United States
in promoting stability in the Middle East on several occasions, for instance when it
joined Saudi Arabia against Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War. Most importantly, Mubarak
committed his country with respect to the Camp David accords signed in 1979 with
Israel. A cable of March 2009, leaked by ‘WikiLeaks’, perfectly sums up the American
geostrategic advantage in supporting Mubarak’s regime: “Egypt remains at peace
with Israel, and the US military enjoys priority access to the Suez Canal and Egyptian
airspace”. Thus, it should not be surprising to read that the United States government
was providing its precious Arab ally with $1.3 billion per year in foreign military
aid. In addition to his foreign policy program, Mubarak carried out a process of
economic liberalisation, also of value to Washington, which started when Sadat moved

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36 Ibidem.
past the era of Nasser’s authoritarian and centralised economy, but which was
translated, as discussed earlier, into an impressive growth of wealth concentration
and socio-economic disparity. Finally, the presence of a virtually unchallengeable
political leader such as Mubarak, enabled the Egyptian government to keep the
Muslim Brotherhood under control, essentially excluding the party from the political
life of the country, which also reassured the American government, notoriously
fearful of Islamic parties, but which jeopardised the very essence of the concept
of democracy.

The reasons behind the fall of Mubarak have already been examined: a mixture of
political and economic injustices, fake promises and disappointing realities, eventually
led the Egyptian population to rise against the authoritarian power of its President,
who on February 2011, was finally forced to resign. But what happened next?

The Egyptian Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) retained power until
July 2012, taking charge of the so called ‘democratic transition’ of Egypt, and
promising it had no aspiration of running the country. Despite these reassurances
though, the transition “…has been an almost surreal collection of paradoxes and
contradictions” 37, as Khaled Elgindy rightfully points out, as it has been stained by
numerous episodes of violence between the population and the military, with thousands
taking to the streets and demanding immediate end to military rule. This could hardly
come as a surprise, for a country that for most of its contemporary history has been
governed by generals and military officials, as the detainment of power by the SCAF
represents a clear step back rather than a step forward. Indeed, the period in between
the fall of Mubarak and the election of Morsi was anything but democratic. A report
by the Human Rights Watch highlights how “Under SCAF leadership, excessive use
of force and extrajudicial killings, torture, attacks on peaceful protests, and arbitrary
arrests of bloggers and journalists have become commonplace and illustrate how
little has changed”. 38 The SCAF tried to shield itself blaming ‘no better identified
third parties’ of implementing ‘foreign agendas’ in order to fuel the campaign against
the armed forces, while some members even advocated that the protesters would be
“….thrown into Hitler’s ovens”. 39 Such a statement, from which the military
government wisely distanced itself, nonetheless gives an idea of the level of democracy
that the SCAF was ensuring for the transition of Egypt.

Despite the controversies that emerged during the SCAF-imposed military regime,
by the end of June 2012 the world witnessed the first democratic elections in the
history of Egypt and the accession to power of the Islamist Mohammed Morsi,
member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Widespread speculation has been made to explain
and justify the somehow unexpected victory of the Islamists, which go from the
intricate mechanism of the electoral system to the alleged economic support of the

rich Gulf countries, to the apparent fragmentation of the secular non-Islamic parties. Nevertheless, despite whatever conjecture one might wish to make, the Muslim Brotherhood representative Mohammed Morsi was indeed elected by the population in what could be considered “…a broadly fair election”.

The election of Morsi might have been a disappointment for those who, in Egypt and abroad, were hoping and expecting the country to embrace the path towards a ‘westernised’ secular democracy. In fact, during its short life, Morsi’s political steps rapidly took the shape of a fundamentalist Islamist agenda, with a strong pledge to implement the Shari’a and to shape Egypt into a radical Islamist state. This was hardly a surprise though; during the campaign, Morsi made his stand rather clear, as he passionately declared: “The Koran was and will continue to be our constitution… I take an oath before Allah and before you all that regardless of the actual text [of the constitution]… Allah willing, the text will truly reflect [Sharia], as will be agreed upon by the Egyptian people, by the Islamic scholars, and by legal and constitutional experts”42, showing an even more radical position as he recited: “The Prophet Muhammad is our leader, Jihad is our path, and death for the sake of Allah is our most lofty aspiration”.43 For as alarming as Morsi’s position might sound, it is important to note that Egypt is not new to advocating Islam in politics, as a look back in history would indeed give evidence of the fact that its population, or at least part of it, has already disclosed the propensity to seek shelter in more traditional values after the failure of secular experimentations. For instance, after the disastrous outcome of the 1967 war, which had officially put an end to the Nasserist ideology and its secular mark encapsulated in his political philosophy, many found comfort in the Islamic al-turath, heritage, and sought a stronger proximity to the traditional values of their religion: to say it with Fred Halliday, author of The Cold War: Global Conflict, Regional Upheavals, the emergence of Islamic movements in Egypt after the Six Day War “…reflected a general rejection of the secular modernity associated with radical nationalist politics and with the modernising state”.44 Nevertheless, the power rested secure in the hands of members

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43 Ibidem.
of the Egyptian military, as it had simply shifted from Nasser to Sadat in 1970 and to Mubarak in 1981. This inevitably confined the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, to either be illegal and persecuted or to play at most a very marginal role in the political life of the country, and now imposes a legitimate doubt: is it a mere coincidence that on the first free elections after 60 years of military rule, the result favoured an Islamic party?

As mentioned above, many reasons can be analysed to justify the already narrow victory of Morsi, and the analysis of the legitimacy of the Brotherhood’s victory on the 2012 elections would be unrelated to the scope of this paper. However, an important consideration has to be stressed.

Despite the political struggle, and in addition to the ideological appeal, the Muslim Brotherhood kept operating in the territory, providing various services in impoverished areas, through the combination of “…religion, social welfare, and political activism in its work”45 and therefore building its constituency upon the lower-middle class. The Brotherhood has thus largely benefited from the widespread impression that it was an honest and caring organization, “…often in contrast to the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), popularly perceived as self-serving and corrupt”.46

If we acquiesce to the paradigm that the Arab Spring was originated by the lower-middle class in popular opposition against authoritarian regimes, for their political, economic and social abuses, and if we allow Halliday’s analysis to play a role in today’s events, perhaps it would not come as such a surprise that an organisation, who for several decades has charitably operated among the Egyptian lower-middle class while advocating a return to the traditional Islamic values, ended up benefiting from a quite large consensus.

Back to the future: A coup is a coup

Despite the fact that the first free elections in Egypt removed the power from secular military leaders, ending approximately 60 years of military based leadership, the outcome of the elected Islamic turned out to be utterly disappointing. Such assessment does not originate from an ideological point of view, nor from a rejection of certain religious values that are manifestly dear to a large portion of the Egyptian population; it is strictly based on a pragmatic assessment of Morsi’s presidency, which, while promoting radical Islam, thus alienating practically all the secular segments of society, also failed to deliver on the most urgent issues, the same issues that brought him to power in the first place.

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People were demanding rights and social justice, and instead they received a leader who interpreted “...a narrow electoral victory as a mandate to rule alone”\(^{47}\), and whose first political actions were indeed designed to grant himself “...far-reaching powers...”\(^{48}\) through a new constitution. They were expecting openness, tolerance and pluralism and they were to be yet again disappointed. What made matters even worse was, the priority given to the reshaping of Egypt into a radicalised Islamist country that prevented Morsi from tackling the severe economic troubles that were, and still are, afflicting the country: it was in fact reported that “Over the past year, economic conditions in Egypt have gone from bad to worse”\(^{49}\), and approximately 80% of the Egyptian population admitted that, under the Morsi government, the economy of the country was getting worse.\(^{50}\) Lacking a pragmatic political agenda and attempting to consolidate its legitimacy among the “...broadest possible audience”\(^{51}\), Morsi was more dedicated to showing himself “...leading prayers at the palace more often than signing new trade and investment agreements”\(^{52}\), at a time when pragmatism was badly needed instead.

Some might argue that “…Morsi faced an almost impossible challenge from the start”\(^{53}\), due to the fact that he inherited huge economic, political and social problems left by the 30 year-long Mubarak regime. However, even granting for the sake of argument that there was a more or less strong base of popular legitimacy, it is undeniable that the Brotherhood leader did not meet the peoples’ demands, and ended up producing a rather paradoxical result: “A year later, now, the millions of Egyptians who cheered for Morsi are saying he must go”\(^{54}\), as was acutely commented by Fawaz Gerges.

The result of Morsi’s leadership was thus a strongly disappointing discrepancy between promises of better life and a failure in meeting expectations, just as it happened with the first uprisings, the ones that sparked the Arab Spring. This time though, a large part of the Egyptian population had made a choice, had voted and had elected Morsi. This is the basis for understanding the current state of affairs in Egypt.

By the 30\(^{\text{th}}\) June, one year after the elections of 2012, a new and perhaps inevitable wave of protests was set off by tens of thousands of Egyptians, who took Tahir


\(^{52}\) Smith-Park, ‘The Rise and Rapid Fall...’.

\(^{53}\) Ibidem.
Square demanding Morsi’s resignation. The SCAF promptly seized the opportunity to get rid of a vexatious leader, and delivered an ultimatum in which it stated that Morsi had 48 hours “…to respond to the people’s demands, or the armed forces would impose its own roadmap of the future”.

Two struggles emerged simultaneously: while in the corridors of power Morsi challenged the SCAF by rejecting the ultimatum and insisting he was indeed the legitimate leader, the streets of Cairo witnessed severe clashes between the supporters of Morsi and those who opposed to him. Eventually, on the 3rd July, the military coup opened a veritable ‘Pandora’s box’. General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi seized power, overthrowing Morsi and arresting several members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The riots in the streets grew worse and blood was spilled as the military and the anti-Morsi movement confronted the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, armed with stones and bats, and with live bullets, killing and injuring hundreds of people the Brotherhood’s supporters. For El-Sisi it was only a matter of hours before he could get in front of the cameras and praise the SCAF intervention and removal of Morsi, who was accused of having “…failed to meet the demands of the Egyptian people”. What people though?

According to eminent Professor Noam Chomsky “…that’s a term that should be avoided. The people are badly split… the reference to the people already tells you something misleading…” In fact, although it is undeniable that in the summer of 2013 Cairo was again overwhelmed by a massive wave of anti-Morsi protests, it is also incontestable that a significant part of the population did support the democratically elected President, and with him it supported the very concept of democracy. Morsi was certainly operating within an alarming ideological framework, as he tried to reform Egypt through strict and radical religious precepts, but to many Egyptians he had been allowed to access power by their vote, a privilege for which they had already spilled blood in 2011. Thus, the overthrow of Morsi assumes a dramatic tone for two reasons: the first one regards the fact that the military has toppled a democratically elected regime, the first one in Egypt, ignoring the will of a large portion of the population that was supporting it; the second one is that Egypt is now yet again under military rule, not for the first time in its history. For as convenient as it might be to portray the 3rd July event as a step forward towards democracy with the ability to prevent a radical Islamist from reshaping Egypt, in truth it was nothing but a military coup. The democratic break of 2012, for as disastrous as it might have been, was too brief indeed to allow the country to test the advantages and limits of a political system separated from military power, and El-Sisi’s coup tells us that it will be a long time before the military will relinquish power, if indeed it will ever do so. In fact, the Egyptian military is not

programmed to yield to a democratic elected government: after all, Egypt is under the rule of Generals and members of the military force since 1952 and Morsi’s regime was too short and controversial to allow an actual and significant breakthrough. This interweaved connection between military apparatus and political power now looks too tight to imagine it will just simply cease to be, unless a process of deep reformation begins. The country also looks a long way from that goal, an assessment easily made simply by observing the jubilant reaction of a big fraction of the Egyptian population to the 3rd July coup.

How someone managed to see El-Sisi’s seizure of power as beneficial to the country remains a mystery. “The military will act the way the military acts everywhere, and historically in Egypt as well. It will impose… a harsh, brutal regime, its aim will be to reinforce its own power… they will crash dissidents…”58 commented Chomsky, and rightfully so.

As discussed earlier in this paper, the original spirit of the Arab Spring was based on a strong and overwhelming desire for democracy, and as has been argued, the Arab idea of democracy is not very different from ours, as it is founded upon principles that all of us can recognise to be the fundamentals for any democratic system. Are the military in Egypt respecting these principles? It would seem not.

The massacre of the Muslim Brotherhood supporters carried out by the military on August 19th, 2013, has been “…the most serious incident of mass unlawful killings in modern Egyptian history”59, with over 700 Egyptians killed and thousands injured. Freedom, civil and political rights, justice and equality are being trampled on; the Muslim Brotherhood, the leading opposition party, is being persecuted regardless of that spirit of political pluralism which constitutes the foundation of any democratic system. Is the country secure? Is the country stable? Again, the answer has to be a negative one. Clashes between the population and the army are a sad routine in today’s Egypt, freedom is openly denied and the economic troubles of the country are nowhere near being resolved.

Old rhetoric

If today we struggle to make any prediction about the future of Egypt, it is largely because we struggle to imagine a democracy founded upon military rule. A government which operates under military rule inevitably evokes the idea of dictatorship rather than one of democracy, as the legitimization of power does not come from public consensus, but rather by the use of military force, or at least the threat of it. In the Middle East, the military has traditionally played an important role in politics, particularly in Egypt. The Free Officers’ 1952 military coup, which freed the Egyptians “…from the elite of big landowners and the royal dynasty that constituted its backbone, which had held the key political, economic and social positions in

58 Ibidem.
Egypt”⁶⁰, that being the monarchy of King Farouk, has projected in the minds of the Egyptian population the idea of a military power at the service of the people. In 1952, Nasser’s Free Officers “…did not accede to power by a consent of any large section of the Egyptian public, prior or even concurrent. They were not chosen. They took power forcibly; the public simply acquiesced”⁶¹, nonetheless they offered a change sought by a good portion of the Egyptian society, eager to get rid of the old monarchy. Easily seducing the masses through a skilful use of popular rhetoric, Nasser was “…never serious about any schemes of popular political organization”.⁶² Nevertheless, he quickly managed to create foreign demons instead of allowing the people to create domestic ones, as it was the western imperialist forces, traditionally Britain and France, which were now seeking to prevent the Egyptians from their self-determination rights. Deceived by the powerful rhetoric that portrayed the new military government as the champion of the peoples’ ambitions, the Egyptian population was easily distracted from realising that their self-determination rights had again been stripped away from their hands, right at the moment when they had their chance to claim it. Later on, the power and prestige of the military was easily consolidated through the dismantling of the “…superstructure of institutions…”⁶³ on one hand, and through the ideological appeal of the pan-Arabism goal on the other, which advocated Arab unity against foreign imperialism. Following the Nasser era, it was again down to the military to start in 1973 the process of liberating the Sinai Peninsula after the Six Day war; and more recently, it was the military who stepped in to force Mubarak to resign, in 2011. “So there is a long history of the military being or portraying itself as being one hand of the Egyptian people”⁶⁴, argues Steven Cook, as the presence of the military in politics has indeed been so dense and substantial throughout the history of Egypt that people in the country might still be induced to associate a military coup with processes of political and social liberalization. This might be a rather significant obstacle to overcome, and might in fact require a process of ‘de-idealization’ of the Egyptian military power.

In Egypt today there is probably more awareness of what a democracy actually means. Some people in Cairo have repeatedly acknowledged the terrible mistakes made by the Morsi government, but also realise a very basic yet vital concept: democracy is when “…you allow him to rule and fail and then vote him out”.⁶⁵ However, the 3rd July coup has once more prevented the people from benefiting

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⁶¹ Ibid., p. 18.

⁶² Ibid., p. 19.

⁶³ Ibidem.


from this right, and has resulted in the perpetuation of the military power, or rather a military dictatorship.

Sadly, the rhetorical instruments used now do not excessively differ from those used in 1952, and the people of Egypt are once more deceived into believing that the threat is foreign rather than domestic, while the SCAF perfectly plays the role of the champion of Egypt’s transition to democracy.

With virtually no political contenders, SCAF is shielding itself from accusations of authoritarianism through counter-accusations of American imperialism, fuelling the masses to protest against Washington, portrayed as the real danger for Egyptian democracy, and again distracting them from understanding that the looming danger comes from within. While it cannot be argued that the United States has been operating in the Middle East exclusively in the interest of the Arab countries, far be it from me to delve into an analysis of America’s recent actions in the region. What is important to stress is that there are some rather frightening similarities between the propaganda used sixty years ago and the one employed nowadays.

General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, the current Minister of Defence and leader behind the toppling of Mohammed Morsi, is the author of an eleven page-long thesis entitled Democracy in the Middle East, in which he argues “America has been the driving force with respect to supporting America’s national interests. In her effort to do so, America has supported non-democratic regimes and some regimes that were not necessarily well respected in the Middle East… As a result, many in the Middle East question the motives of the United States and her desire to establish democracy in the Middle East now. Is a transition to democracy in the best interest of the United States, or is it in the interests of the Middle Eastern countries? Democracy development in the Middle East will not easily emerge if the initiation of democracy in the Middle East is perceived as a move by the United States to further her own self-interest”. The thesis, while it incidentally and quite alarmingly, advocates “…an extremist view of Islam’s role in a democracy and emphasizes the importance of religion to the region’s politics…” seems to be inspired by the same old rhetoric against the ‘foreign invader’, which draws an easy consensus among the population (it should be noted that America, together with Israel, is considered a major threat in Egypt) and allows the military to be set on the side of the people, simply because it is distancing itself from what the people dislike.

The comparison between Nasser and El-Sisi works well, too well to be ignored. Just like Nasser, El-Sisi is a tough, charismatic leader, a strong proponent of Egyptian nationalism and the role of the military in the country as “…guardians of the patriotic

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responsibility”. He also, perhaps unsurprisingly, consults very often with Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, a famous Egyptian journalist who happened to also be one of Nasser’s closest confidants. Just like during the Nasser era, in Egypt there is now the same, strong cult following towards El-Sisi, with people worshipping him like a hero, waving his photo together with that of the Free Officer’s leader.

People in Egypt have experienced two years of uncertainty, testing the price of a transition to democracy, and wavering dangerously close to falling into the hands of a radicalised Islamic regime. In a moment of extreme fragility, in which it is not exactly clear what direction the country might be taking, people turn to strong leaders to be guided, and in Egypt those are traditionally part of the military, “…the last bastion of stability and recourse”. El-Sisi and Co. are cunningly riding this wave of popularity, but it is important to stress that the apparent legitimization coming from a good portion of the Egyptian population does not derive from a conscious, democratic choice of the people, or from the trust in the alleged noble intentions of the SCAF, or from a widespread approval of a useful and desirable political program. It takes origin from a profound sense of disorientation and bewilderment, which is cleverly being manipulated by the SCAF. The military today has captured the essence of the 1950s and 1960s Egyptian nationalism, originating from a profound dismay and uncertainty, and has thus worked unrelentingly to justify their power by spreading conspiracy theories that the Obama administration was opposing Egypt’s democratic ambitions through an alleged plan to overthrow the military and reinstitute the Brotherhood’s regime. People are tricked into believing that the only way to avoid anti-democratic interferences is to keep the SCAF in a position of power, and those interferences are indeed portrayed as foreign attempts to put into play internal actors into undermining the democratic transition. That is why it is not uncommon today to hear your average Egyptian say: “Americans are with the Muslim Brotherhood…” as if “…it was common knowledge”, and it is unsurprising to see that the pro-Sisi faction is also the most anti-America one. Theories that would want the United States government trying “…to reach an agreement that would guarantee the return of the Brotherhood…” or even worse plotting the death


of hundreds of Brotherhood’s supporters to then blame it on the military regime\(^\text{73}\), expose the distorted truth that there is a sort of master plan, orchestrated by a world superpower, to deprive Egypt of any sort of nationalist desire and right. The ploy is always the same: if people do not like you, find someone they like even less. The Egyptian population does know that there is a military-based government, and it would be preposterous to think otherwise. Nevertheless, there is the widespread belief that the SCAF is protecting the people from any internal and external anti-democratic attempts. As John F. Kennedy pointed out in 1951, following his congressional trip to the Middle East: “…whoever is the enemy of my enemy is my friend”.\(^\text{74}\) History seems now to be repeating itself.

**Demo-crazy**

The case of Egypt examined above confirms what has been argued previously in this paper. The Arab Spring, while it has not failed, has not yet succeeded, but it is producing long-term ructions whose outcome is still unpredictable.

Indeed, much has happened during the past three years, too much perhaps to be able to keep a firm focus on what really matters: the people. Domestic and international actors are playing chess in a perverted game of geo-political interests, civil wars have exploded fuelled by factions eager to benefit from the chaos, while the press and critics have been proclaiming the failure of the Arab Spring with the same rapidity with which, back in 2011, they were professing the triumph of democracy over dictatorship. And yet the Arab people are still fighting for a better life and are still paying a dramatically high price, with hundreds of thousands of civilians brutally killed in endless conflicts. Is it really the beginning of a darker age?

Democracy cannot be built overnight, but can nonetheless be built. History has already showed us that the road to the establishment of a democratic form of government is insidious, and it takes decades, centuries even, before it is fully accepted and recognised. Samuel P. Huntington argues that the world has gone through three waves of democratization, or modern democratization (he indeed excludes the ancient pseudo-democracies, such as the Roman’s or the Greek’s), starting in 1828 all the way up to the late 1980s\(^\text{75}\), and the instability and complexity of the process is proven by the fact that each one of those has then been followed by a reversed wave, which brought the establishment of authoritarian governments, as the cases of Hitler’s Germany or Mussolini’s Italy perfectly illustrate. And even today, in an age in which the western world is prevailingly considered democratic, we are still


presented with all the limits and controversies of that political, economic and social system that falls into the common definition of democracy.

The Arab world has never witnessed such a passionate and persistent struggle for democracy, and the remarkable events of 2011 have kept the world breathless because they have “…raised hopes that the world may be witnessing the start of a fourth wave of democratization, one with the Middle East at its epicentre”. 76 Though, the results so far have also shown how easy it is for a country in transition to be hijacked by actors who, refusing such profound change, steer the trajectory towards anti-liberal and pseudo-democracies.

The case of Egypt is indeed a perfect example of how, in a time lapse of just two years, these actors have worked unrelentingly to establish a tainted version of democracy, applying the so called ‘legitimacy of blackmail’, and thus founding their consensus upon the ‘less evil-solution’ argument. Mohammed Morsi and the Brotherhood’s delusion of grandeur resulted in an attempt to transform Egyptian society into something glaringly conflicting with the idea of democracy. This resulted in the Brotherhood’s self-ousting with the consequent establishment of a military regime, which by definition is inconsistent with the basic principles of democracy.

Nevertheless, these are inevitable hindrances that occur whenever a country is in transition from a historically consolidated authoritarian regime to a brand new democratic form of government, especially if this originates from an ideological aspiration rather than a pragmatic model. Indeed, the historical absence of true forms of democracy in the Middle East prohibits the transition to be based on the emulation of the successful neighbour, let alone that of a western democracy. Arabs want an Arab democracy, not an American one. The path is surely a hard one, but can nonetheless be successfully completed if deception, demagogy and stagnation are overcome in a process of political renovation and cultural reformation. Far be it from me to simplify such an arduous journey, but there are at least four indispensable steps that need to be undertaken.

First of all, the de-idealization of certain political actors is a fundamental step to take in order to overcome a pre-constructed set of beliefs that might frustrate any democratic attempt. This process is probably the most arduous one as it draws its strength from historically consolidated assumptions, but it is nonetheless the most important. The case of Egypt examined earlier, particularly with regards to the role of the SCAF, offers a perfect example of how the historical value attributed to a political actor is a pivotal factor in determining its role in the political life of a country.

As discussed above, the military benefits from such a historically consolidated value that the people are led to turn to their generals and to endorse their rule whenever alternative solutions fail. This idealization inevitably perpetuates a dangerous and paradoxical thinking pattern, which allows military intervention to be associated with a process of political and social liberalization, and thus gain a large approval that dismally overshadows the antithetical fact: a military coup, and the establishment of

76 Pollack, The Arab Awakening…, p. 22.
a military rule that cannot bring political and social liberalization. People in Egypt have accepted the 3rd of July coup because of the recurrence of a certain progression of events and the crystallization of the thinking pattern that military intervention happens indeed for the good of the people. Obviously such a perspective does not allow the people to have the full consciousness that this alleged ‘process of liberalization’ happens through very anti-liberal means, and thus military coups are always justifiable because they are set in motion by what is idealistically perceived to be the will and the hand of the people. Demagogy and deception do the rest, perpetuating this idealization while also silently consolidating the power of the military.

The de-idealization of certain political actors would hence allow the population to gain a more conscious and realistic perception of their role and actions, and in the case of Egypt, would thus enable them to assess a military coup for what it really is: a military coup. Surely in Egypt the military apparatus is so entrenched in the political structure that it is difficult to imagine that generals and officials would not find a way to perpetuate their presence in the various positions of power, yet if deprived of the people’s legitimization, they might be forced to reshape their role according to democratic standards. This would obviously be a long process, but that does not mean it cannot be done. After all, the Egyptian population has already showed to the world the power of a fight for a common cause.

A second pivotal step to undertake is the creation of new and democratic institutions. In fact, a major problem for the Arab countries’ transition is that they lack legitimate and democratic superstructures able to regulate political and social dynamics, like an abuse of power or a social unrest, within their democratic boundaries. These dynamics are thus free to tilt towards a non-democratic direction instead of being constrained within a democratic framework, and even more so if there are actors who wish to prevent the establishment of a democratic system in order to perpetuate or protect their interests.

The absence of democratic superstructures inevitably produces two results. The first one is that it allows dictatorships to emerge and consolidate themselves, and thus to last for an indefinite time. In fact, if a dictator is able to crush or appease the few actors that could pose a threat to its regime, like opposition parties or the armed forces, it will have nobody to answer to for its actions and will therefore be able to extend its power with no constraints. When it does happen that the dictator is questioned, other non-democratic agents are free to come into play and have their way, as they assume the role of the superstructure that is not otherwise offered by a pre-existing system, just like the SCAF has done in Egypt. This fact produces the second result, which is the replacement of a dictator with another dictator: Mubarak to Morsi to El-Sisi. Thus, to achieve democracy, one cannot merely overthrow a dictator, because this will easily be replaced by a new one. A superstructure has to be created, formed by strong, legitimate and respected institutions that can regulate the political and social life of a country.

Another important step, strongly linked to the previous one, is the reform of the political culture. As argued previously, many of the Arab countries, and the domestic
actors that operate in them, are not educated to the rule of law, which inevitably allows the disputes to develop anarchically rather than democratically. This is another rather significant obstacle, because without the application of democratic principles, which can only derive from a profound reformation of the political culture, certain actors will always be allowed and somehow justified to use non-democratic means to impose their will. The case of Egypt is again quite illustrative, as the SCAF has indeed operated outside the rule of law when it overthrew Morsi, backed by thousands of jubilant Egyptians. This proves the fact that not only political but even social actors have to develop a new democratic awareness. As Kenneth M. Pollack explains, it would be hard to imagine the US army marching to Washington and seize power, simply because “…the US military have been fully inculcated into a political culture of democracy…”\textsuperscript{77} And it could safely be assumed that it would be even harder to imagine thousands of American citizens praising the coup, as they are perfectly aware of the fact that a democratically elected government ought to be democratically changed. Surely there is more to a democracy than the elections, but a legitimate political turnover is nonetheless a major step to undertake in countries that have known change of governments mainly through the rule of force. A correction of the political culture in the Arab countries would therefore bring all the actors to operate through the rule of law, thus would offer guarantees that any sort of social unrest or political dispute would be dealt with by democratic instruments endorsed by all parties involved. The Arab societies are indeed new to the model of democracy, but there are strong and positive signals of an actual understanding of its main feature. In Tunisia, for example, “…the democratically elected Islamist government… promised to resign peacefully, with no threat of a coup d’état in sight”\textsuperscript{78}, while in Egypt, as mentioned earlier, some people started to realise that democracy is when “…you allow him to rule and fail and then vote him out”\textsuperscript{79}, without the military taking control and ousting the president or the prime minister in charge. Surely we could not imply that a new political culture will emerge simultaneously in every country involved in the Arab Spring, but we could hope that the process has at least been set in motion.

The final point is an obvious one, but should not be overlooked: the success or failure of the Arab transition to democracy is highly dependent on the perseverance of the Arab people. Two challenges in fact emerge whenever a population begins the journey towards a new, democratic system of government. The first one is the risk that the people would lose their enthusiasm, that initial pulse that had sparked the revolution in the first place. It takes time and patience to achieve significant results, and the struggle could prompt settling for a lesser accomplishment. This would

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., p. 89.


\textsuperscript{79} Esposito, ‘Living in Denial…’.
inevitably perpetuate the legitimacy of blackmail, as the exhaustion could indeed bring the people to accept the ‘less evil’ solution and adopt another form of pseudo-democracy. The second challenge is that whichever democratic structure gets built, it will need the support of the people to ensure its correct functioning. It has been demonstrated how the transition can be hijacked by actors who wish to prevent the full establishment of a democracy, hence every single achievement, for as small as it might be, needs to be fully supported by the people, or otherwise the fragility of the new democratic structure might be easily exploited and manipulated to either make it fail or spoil its original purpose.

The four points examined above are not a step-by-step procedure, and the events that have taken place in the Middle East since the end of 2010 have shown a much more complex reality. In fact, the results that have been produced by the Arab Spring are now fragmented among the various Arab countries, and this suggests that each country willing to endorse a democratic system will have to follow a realist agenda that could easily adapt to the local context in which it is implemented.

The brief analysis of the Egyptian Spring provided above offers a case study from which it is possible to identify dangers and challenges for a country in transition, and it is dismaying to admit that the result of the uprisings in Egypt seems now to be reflecting a failure rather than a triumph. The country is back to square one, with the military firmly holding the reins of power and brutally crushing the opposition. It is difficult to make a prediction of what will happen in the country, but surely much will depend on the determination of the people to de-idealize certain political actors, to create new institutions, to reform the political culture and, especially, to not give up and concede defeat.