

Authoritarian Resilience and Political Transformation in the Arab World: Lessons from the Arab Spring 2.0

LÁSZLÓ CSICSMANN

Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary

laszlo.csicsmann@uni-corvinus.hu


ERZSÉBET N. RÓZSA

National University of Public Service, Hungary

nroza.erszebet@gmail.com

In 2019, a renewed protest wave in the Arab World has drawn the attention of scholars to the profound challenges of theorizing the political transition process. This article pays particular attention to the different theoretical discourses and previous experience of the 2011 wave of protests. The 2019 wave of protests mainly reached the rentier republics, where the old social contract had collapsed, and a transition had started. This paper argues that the political transformation of the region has not ended yet, and the recent protest wave is part of the emergence of neo-authoritarian regimes. This study addresses the divergent trajectories of political transformation in the countries impacted by the second wave of protests. Namely, the research asks, which factors and mechanisms explain the different results of the process? Why did discontent in the four countries – Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq – not erupt in 2011, but in 2019 only? The study considers four explanatory factors (regime type, the role of armed forces, the collapse of the social contract, and sectarianism) to analyse select cases (Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Sudan) from the recent upheavals of 2019. The theory of adaptive authoritarianism is applied to the four cases, finding that the initial political context significantly determines the outcome of the protests.

Key Words: Middle East and North Africa, authoritarian upgrading, adaptive authoritarianism, Arab Spring, non-democratic regimes, rentierism

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THE FAILURE OF THEORIZING ARAB POLITICS

[4] The Middle East region has been witnessing waves of political unrest since the states of the region achieved independence in the mid-20th century. With eight monarchies and 'life-long' leaders even in the secular Arab states, the question of regime stability is central for political scientists concerned with theorising the political processes making these regimes resilient to change. And, in the same vein, when the 2011 protests turned into the Arab Spring, much was written about the inapplicability of existing political theories to explain the recent developments in the region. The decade of the Arab Spring, however, has provided a fertile ground for experts to analyse how unpredictable – based on theories developed over political processes elsewhere in the world – the political changes of the region still are. Thus, the question is if a theory of the Arab political processes can be framed.

Historically, three different explanatory paradigms have emerged with the claim to offer an indigenous explanation for the direction of the transformation processes in the Arab World:

- 1 *The school of 'Arab exceptionalism'* of the 1980s and 1990s, rooted in the debate between general social scientists and Area Studies experts-called the 'Area Studies Controversy' (Bank and Busse 2021) – claims that the region has escaped the global waves of democratization. Area studies experts argue that Middle Eastern politics is embedded in a unique cultural and historical setting, thus the general theories of Political Science and International Relations are unable to explain the contemporary tendencies (Tessler, Nachtwey, and Dressel 1999). Eva Bellin goes even further when she argues that the engagement of Arab regimes with global political trends in the 1990s was characterized by a 'dual resistance' to economic and political reform (Bellin 2004). Nevertheless, this thesis of Arab exceptionalism has been challenged by the waves of Arab protests confirming that Arab political regimes are not exempt from political turmoil and unrest. Relying on the 'regime survival strategy' by Arab ruling elites as described by Korany,



Brynen, and Noble (1998) could not maintain authoritarian stability anymore.

2 *Democratization theory*, drawn up over the successful transitions in Latin-America and Central Europe in the 1990s, held that an uprising against an authoritarian regime marks the beginning of a democratic transformation (Hinnebusch 2015, 205–6). Yet, in the 2011 Middle Eastern political transformation only one country took on a path towards democratization: Tunisia, which has characteristics distinctly different from those of the other Arab states, such as a homogenous society, a French speaking elite, the role of a national trade union in mobilizing the population, an apolitical armed forces and self-constraining political actors, especially the Islamists (Zoubir 2015). It is also noted that the Tunisian model is very fragile (as yet) and it cannot be considered a consolidated democracy with most of the old elite in the same positions as under Ben Ali (Gallien and Werenfels 2019). Consequently, democratization as yet cannot be considered an irreversible process.¹

[5]

3 Heydemann and Leenders (2011) in their *post-democratization discourse* – established the theory before the Arab Spring – present a process of adaptation and learning, which explains how the protesters and the ruling elites adapt to the changing political context. Stacher defines adaptation [by the political elites] as a ‘political change that adjusts a state to changes in its environment [...] without giving up power or sacrificing the cohesion of elites’ (Stacher 2012, 22). Adaptation, therefore, takes authoritarian stability for granted, and consequently, Middle Eastern political regimes are resilient (authoritarian resilience) to political pressure both from the bottom-up and from the outside (Hinnebusch 2015, 205–6). However, this process of adaptation-called by Heydemann

¹ In July 2021, Tunisia has witnessed a renewed political crisis with the dismissal of the government by the President. At the time of writing, it is impossible to characterize the Tunisian system as a fully-fledged democracy.

[6]

authoritarian upgrading (Heydemann 2007) – by the so-called post-populist republics and non-oil monarchies (Jordan and Morocco) indicates that a ‘learning process’ has taken place. In the 1990s, new forms of control over the population and political opposition emerged: control of civil society, new methods of settlement of political disputes, the use of selective economic reforms, control over new communication channels (social media), as well as a new type of international relations concerned with enhancing relations with non-Western states (Heydemann 2007).

Nevertheless, although this authoritarian upgrading has contributed to the stability of the authoritarian regimes, it fails to explain why and how some regimes have lost control leading to the 2011/2019 events. Also, the authoritarian upgrading theory focuses on the regimes per se, while leaves the response of the societies unaccounted for. The present paper aims at building its argument largely on the concept of *adaptive authoritarianism* as it helps to explain the differences in the outcomes of different transformation processes taking place in the different Arab states.

The recent protest waves (2019 and after) in the Arab World are analysed using 4 case studies with the aim to answer the question if this transformation has been completed yet, or if we will witness a new process of transformation or persistent political change. The paper argues that the protest wave of 2019 could not be considered as an Arab Spring 2.0, but instead that these protests are happening in the larger context of the transition from old type of authoritarian regimes to a new type of authoritarian setting. To this end the factors which could explain the differences in the results of the transformation are identified, pointing out how divergent the outcomes of the 2019 protest wave are, with an emphasis on the structural reforms of the political system.

Four cases have been selected-Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan- in which not only protests have taken place, but prominent leaders of the countries were ousted from power. In Algeria and Sudan the long-ruling authoritarian Presidents were forced to leave, while



in Iraq and Lebanon the quasi-democratically elected Prime Ministers left the political arena. However, while each case has unique, context-related features, distinguishing different regime/transformation types in the region, they prove that the region is still in the process of a systemic, regional and internal transformation, and the so-called Arab Spring has not ended yet. [7]

The general context of the 2019 demonstrations and following events thus fit into the systemic, regional and internal process of transformation, which is characterized and defined by both internal and external factors. While the relevance of the latter cannot be underestimated, the present paper focuses on the internal factors of the transition process, such as the ‘point of departure’ of the protests’ – i.e. the domestic political context-the role of the armed forces, the collapse of the ‘unsocial social contract, and the role of sectarianism. First, the four explanatory factors are analysed from a theoretical perspective comparing the 2011 and 2019 protest waves in the Middle East. Then the four case studies will be compared on the basis of the unique features of the political systems of the second wave of protests.

THE ‘POINT OF DEPARTURE’ OF THE PROTESTS:
THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONTEXT

Previous studies on transitology/democratic transition emerging during the end of the Cold War introduced different explanations of ‘authoritarian breakdown,’ but regarding the Middle East even the question if an authoritarian breakdown has happened in the four selected cases can be valid, proving (again) that the democratic transition theory could not be applied directly. One of the contributions to the literature is the finding that authoritarian breakdown does not necessarily lead to democracy, but can lead to authoritarian transition too. Stacher even warns the scholars against applying the concept of authoritarian breakdown on the cases of the Arab Uprisings (Stacher 2015, 260–1). Thus, this paper argues that the evolution of the majority of the Arab political regimes should be understood rather as a transformation process from an old to a new type of authoritarian regime, and not as a regime change.

TABLE 1 Typology of the Arab Regimes

State type	Oil/gas rich states (rentier economies)	Oil/gas poor states (non-rentier economies)
Republics	Algeria, Libya, Iraq	Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon
Monarchies	Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates	Jordan, Morocco

[8]

NOTES Prepared on the basis of Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds (2015, 60).

When analysing this process, the old authoritarian regimes offer themselves as a logical ‘point of departure.’ Recent studies on the Arab protest wave of 2011 confirm that the starting point of the protests, along with certain other factors, could explain the outcomes (Hinnebusch 2015; Stepan and Linz 2013). However, since consolidation of a democracy – based on historical experience – usually takes about fifty years to complete on average, the transition initiated by the Arab Spring can be still in the beginning phase.

Regime typology may help to identify the differences in the region when trying to answer why discontent in the four countries – Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq – did not erupt in 2011, but in 2019 only. Based on the two-fold regime typology (monarchy/republic, rentier state/non-rentier state, table 1) we can state that the first wave of the Arab Spring – threatening regime stability – started in the ‘non-rentier republics’ (except for Libya) (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015, 60). The 2019 Arab demonstrations hit the republics again, but while in 2011 events were mostly unfolding in non-rentier economies, in 2019 Algeria and Iraq, two rentier states, were also affected. The other two states, Lebanon and, following its split from South Sudan in 2011, Sudan are poor in oil reserves, i. e. are not rentier economies.

On the basis of the above, however, it may also be cautiously concluded that the monarchical character provides more resilience to a country than rentierism. Though the discussion of the monarchies would exceed the scope of this paper, it is noteworthy that both in 2011 and in 2019 the Arab Uprisings struck the republics in the first place, while monarchies have proved more resilient to the



demonstrations. This *monarchical exceptionalism*, subject to many academic debates (Yom 2012), was explained by the fact that most of the monarchies are rentier economies,² where state budgets are derived mostly from incomes from oil and gas trade, making welfare expenditure possible and contributing to the maintenance of the social contract. Yet, the examples of Algeria and Iraq contradict this proposition. [9]

Furthermore, this two-fold regime-typology (monarchy/republic, rentier state/non-rentier state) still cannot answer the question why exactly these countries were affected: (a) not all monarchies are rentier states (Jordan, Morocco); (b) there are Arab republics, which are rentier economies themselves (Algeria, Libya); and (c) even states with much smaller budgets raised their public spending significantly in 2011 to quiet demands for reform. Therefore, neither state type, nor rentierism in itself explains monarchical exceptionalism.

DIVERSE TRAJECTORIES DURING THE FIRST WAVE AND SECOND WAVE OF PROTESTS

The transformation of the political regimes induced by the first wave of the Arab Spring has produced different outcomes, mostly determined by the characteristics of the political system:

- Egypt is the example of a *re-arrangement* in the sense that the Sisi regime is again built on the dominance of the armed forces.
- Tunisia is the only example of a *successful democratic transition* as yet.³
- As the result of weakening state structures, a '*state vacuum*' and civil war has evolved in three countries: Yemen, Syria and Libya (Gaub 2017a).

² Out of the eight Arab monarchies six (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Oman) are rentier economies, while Morocco and Jordan are not or semi-rentier ones depending on the type of definition used.

³ In Tunisia a recent political crisis has emerged in 2021, which questioned the successful democratic transition. However, at the time of writing, the outcome of this political crisis has yet to be seen.

[10]

- In the other Arab states there have been *democratic-looking political reforms* related to the hybrid political regimes, however, in the context of the basically authoritarian structures *no meaningful transformation* has taken place. This implies that these countries could potentially look forward to further transformation.

In the context of the 2019 developments the same four scenarios can be observed:

- Algeria and Sudan, both termed as ‘military regimes,’ had all the *indications of a possible Egypt-like transition* (Kamrava 1998).
- Lebanon, with its confessional state model, was considered a proto-democracy (Kamrava 1998) with the *expectations of a democratic transition*.
- Iraq – at least for certain periods – showed *weakening state structures and ‘state vacuum.’*
- The rest of the Arab countries went on with the *democratic-looking hybrid political regimes with no meaningful transformation* in their basically authoritarian structures (with the potential of further transformation remaining).

GENERAL FEATURES OF THE 2019 PROTEST WAVE

The above conclusions seem to support the presumption that the 2019 demonstrations fit into the transformation started in 2010–2011 and in themselves they cannot be considered a structurally new series of events. A further analysis helps to uncover the parallels in spite of the differences in the political events unfolding in the four countries – Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan – including the similarities to those in 2011.

- 1 Although both in 2011 and in 2019 there were only some Arab states experiencing demonstrations on such a scale that a transformation started in the political system, the question is why – in both 2011 and in 2019 – it was these countries. In the four 2019 Arab Spring countries a further question can



be raised: *Why not in 2011 and why in 2019?* One significant characteristic stands out: all the four had *experienced armed conflicts* in the previous decades, the sense of which is still alive even if the younger generations have no personal memories thereof. In the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) more than one hundred thousand people died, and in 2006 the country faced a short war with Israel. In Sudan, the civil war had two phases (1955–1972, 1983–2005), following which South Sudan broke away in 2011. In Algeria, following the 1989 elections a bloody civil war broke out, which went on until 2002, with the number of the dead in the tens of thousands. In Iraq, following the 2003 American-led intervention an armed uprising evolved, followed by – after the withdrawal of the US troops – the quick appearance and expansion of the Islamic State. Consequently, civil war conditions and the memories thereof in all four countries played a significant restraining role and partly explain why the population was not mobilized in 2011 (Dunne 2020, 184–5).

[11]

- 2 Further similarities/differences of the four states – based on *economic and social data* – are included in table 2. The differing parameters prove that neither the demonstrations nor their outcomes can be deduced from the social problems alone. Three out of the four countries are medium-income states, while Sudan is one of the least developed states in the Arab World.
- 3 An important conclusion of the 2011, and even more so the 2019, demonstrations has been the theory of *adaptive authoritarianism*, which states that in the course of demonstrations and the state response, a two-direction socialization (‘learning’) process is taking place (Heydemann and Leenders 2011). On the one hand, Arab political leaders are following the political processes in their region closely, preparing a cost-benefit analysis, learning the techniques with which demonstrations can be stopped/prevented, and elaborating their policies accordingly. In 2011 both Muammar Qaddafi and Bashar al-Assad came to the conclusion that if they fight back, they

TABLE 2 Main Data of the four Arab States in 2020

Countries	Algeria	Iraq	Lebanon	Sudan
population (million)	43	39	5.5	45.6
GDP per capita (USD)	15,200	16,700	19,600	4,300
[12] Poverty (%)	23.0	23.0	28.6	46.5
Unemployment (%)	11.7	16	9.7	19.6
Unemployment among 15–24 year old youth (%)	39.3	25.6	n.a.	n.a.
Urbanization rate (%)	73.7	70.9	88.9	35.3
Literacy among the population above 15 (%)	81.4	50.1	95.1	60.7

NOTES Based on data from from The World Factbook (<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/>).

may remain in power. The international reaction to the external – NATO – intervention in Libya in March 2011 made Assad conclude that the possibility of a similar measure in Syria is of a very low probability. Consequently, the Assad regime used a higher level of force against the demonstrators. The countries, which introduced political reforms (see above) are also cases in point. On the other hand, the demonstrators also have undergone a learning process and used experience in other countries to help their cause at home. In April 2019 this was evident in the parallelly unfolding events in Algeria and Sudan. Algerian President Bouteflika resigned on April 2, which induced the Sudanese demonstrators to demand the resignation of President Bashir, who was finally ousted from office by the army on April 11. In the Sudanese case not only were the demonstrators following the Algerian example, but also the armed forces, which probably contributed to the swift departure of the President.

THE ROLE OF THE ARMED FORCES

Theories on political change underline that a political regime responds to political turmoil with the use of force. However, as historical examples prove, if the level of repression reaches an unprece-



dened level it may force a regime change. It is also often argued that should a political reform be launched by the military in the shadow of an existing political and/or economic influence, the new civilian government – taking over from the military – tries to curb the privileges of the military often leading to a counter-response (Huntington 1991, 238) (see the Egyptian transition after 2011). [13]

The role of the armed forces in the MENA has been the subject of many analyses due to their specific relationship with power, politics and economy, and their embeddedness in society (Abul-Magd 2017). Since most Arab countries fought wars of independence and/or the military elites were directing the modernization of the country and/or were experiencing wars and cease-fires, the military always had a high prestige and was considered part of the *raison d'état*. Thus, the military's participation in and 'contribution' to the transition itself was crucial (Hinnebusch 2012). Nevertheless, in many countries the tradition of tribal armed groups and/or militias has produced parallel armed forces, which, according to the changing political situation, were recurrently incorporated in the armed forces of the state.

In the 2011 Arab Spring demonstrations the military's participation was decisive during the events, though with different patterns (Barany 2011):

- The army supported the demonstrators (Egypt, Tunisia).
- The army (and the paramilitary forces) were split over the demonstrations (Libya, Yemen).
- The army stood against the demonstrators (Syria, Bahrain).

In the 2019 demonstrations, however, besides the regular army paramilitary forces had also to be taken into account. As noted above, with the memories of civil wars, the population in all four countries rejected the use of force in any form and wanted to avoid further civil war. In Algeria and Sudan, in order to ensure regime survival, the military helped remove President Bouteflika and President al-Bashir from office. While in Iraq and Lebanon, where paramilitary forces were closely related to, or even forming part of political actors, the army had no significant role.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE 'UNSOCIAL' SOCIAL
CONTRACT

[14]

Scholars often frame the Arab Spring as a consequence of the increasing socio-economic challenges faced by citizens resulting in the collapse of the previous unwritten social contract due to the spill-over effect of the global financial crisis in 2008. Amirah El-Haddad argues that after the failure of the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s, regimes supported the crony capitalists of their countries in order to strengthen regime cohesion (El-Haddad 2020). Thus, the emerging social contracts, which have been challenged by the recent unrests, are rather 'unsocial.' Yet, the waves of demonstrations in 2010/2011, as well as in 2019, were not the first in the history of the Middle East and North Africa. The manifold crises of the region – political, economic and social – first became manifest in the 'bread riots' in the 1970's in reaction to the economic liberalization measures taken by the regional governments. The liberalization interfered with and demanded to put an end to the system of high state subsidies provided under the social contract, wherein the low level of political freedom was compensated by the low prices of basic food and fuel. While ruling elites through the region could thus consolidate their power, the Arab Spring in 2011 was a clear signal that the social contract formerly providing the basis of this authoritarian stability has come to a breaking point (Silva, Levin, and Morgandi 2012). This, however, raises the question if a new social contract will be established, and if so, on what basis. The 'new' regimes established in the follow-up to the Arab Spring were established on a new/renewed social contract. It is yet to be seen how long and how much stability these can provide to the new ruling elites.⁴

THE ROLE OF SECTARIANISM IN MIDDLE EASTERN
POLITICS

Recent events in the Middle East and North Africa could be described from two different perspectives. One school says that behind

⁴With the outbreak of the Russian-Ukraine war food security related issues have a profound impact on this renewed social contract.



each political issue religious identity plays the most important role; while another approach argues that sectarianism does not play a role in the recent political transformation. Valbjørn's (2020) third perspective establishes a connection between sectarianism and Middle Eastern political developments.

[15]

Though sectarian politics should not be neglected in our analysis of the post-Arab Spring transitions, it seems that the protests' narratives – both in 2011 and in 2019 – were mainly built along nationalist lines rejecting any superficial division of the state.

In the following, the above analysed elements of the transformation process will serve as the basis for comparison.

Algeria

In Algeria, the type of regime as well as its political setting was largely defined by the War of Independence (1954–1962). The consequent state model – a rentier republic – was built on the dominance of the armed forces, a one-party rule (FLN, *Front de Libération Nationale* – reflecting the memory of the struggle for independence) and a strong president. The model was first challenged in 1988 by the 'bread riots,' which initiated a regime survival strategy from the ruling elites. The consequent consolidation of the military-based model could cautiously be considered as a forerunner to the later (post-2011) *Egypt-like re-arrangements*. Yet, the introduction of political reforms, including the 1989 modification of the constitution terminating the political monopoly of the FLN, provides an early case of *adaptive authoritarianism*. Though the diversification of the political scene in itself posed a challenge, the results in the June 1990 municipal elections – with the newly established Islamist party, the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) receiving 55% of the votes – confirmed the erosion of the legacy of the political model rooted in the War of Independence as well as the shift in the identity of the public. Following the FIS lead in the 1991 parliamentary elections, however, the armed forces intervened, the second round was cancelled, and the military – claiming national interests – took over power. The ensuing bloody civil war from 1992 was terminated by the presidency of Abdel Aziz Bouteflika (1999–2019) (Bouandel 2016). In the long

process of regime consolidation President Bouteflika had not only become the symbol of the post-civil-war consolidation and reconciliation, but of the Algerian case of adaptive authoritarianism.

[16] Partly due to the heritage of the War of Independence and in other part due to its role in the democratization process of the 1990s, the perception of the armed forces within the society is still positive. In spite of the atrocities in the civil war, it has not only maintained its popularity, but also increased its political influence: in the 'informal distribution of power' (among the president, the civilian political actors, the intelligence and the military) symbolized by the election of President Bouteflika, the military has emerged as the most powerful political actor, controlling the president and the political parties from behind. Although Bouteflika tried to gain control by playing out the armed forces and the intelligence against each other, following Bouteflika's stroke in 2013, the military took the upper hand and used the President as a puppet to preserve the results of the national consolidation. Consequently, after Bouteflika's ousting from power in April 2019 Saleh became the *de facto* political leader of Algeria until his sudden death in December 2019. The new president Abdelqadir Bensaleh was also proposed by the army, in a way resembling the Egyptian model of re-establishing military-backed rule. Thus, the Algerian armed forces, while rejecting the use of force, introduced a transition controlled from above. Nevertheless, this top-down controlled approach has not proved credible to the public, especially with the awareness of the consequences of the Egyptian authoritarian re-organization (Boubekeur 2020).

Although in 2011 – parallel to the unfolding Arab Spring in Algeria's direct and wider neighbourhood – there were demonstrations in the big cities, the memories of the armed conflicts as well as the increase of the social benefits by the regime prevented further manifestations of public frustration. However, the erosion of the President's legitimacy, the global economic crisis followed by the drop in oil prices in the mid-2010s and the cutback of state budget expenditures meant an end to the social contract 'established' in 1999 (Bartu 2020a, 10). The change in the demography – a new genera-



tion has grown up since the end of the civil war – means that the memory of living amid an armed conflict is not a restraining force anymore. This combination of political, economic and social changes made the context ripe for the demonstrations which started when in 2019 it was announced that President Bouteflika would run (for the fifth time) in the presidential elections planned for 2020, which the demonstrations finally succeeded in preventing. [17]

Sudan

Sudan's political system, due to the protracted North-South civil war (1955–1972), was also defined by the role of the armed forces. Though the 1972 Addis Ababa agreement closed down the first phase of the civil war, in 1983 the second phase started, which was terminated by the bloodless military coup in 1989 led by Brigadier General Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir. The ensuing military dictatorship maintained by the Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation lasted until 1993. From 1993, in a move that can be interpreted as an adaptation process by the regime in general and Bashir in particular, the military dictatorship gave way to a civilian government, wherein Bashir took office as a civilian president heading the National Congress Party. 'Civilianization' was complemented with a top-down Islamization process in alliance with Hassan al-Turabi, widely considered the theoretical father of the Sudanese Islamic revolution. In the process, the *sharia* was introduced (Collins 2008, 185–7). The thirty years of the Bashir regime established a political system based on the equilibrium of the Islamists and the armed forces, balancing the rival armed groups and satisfying the Khartoum economic elites (Tossell 2020).

This balancing act and regime stability, however, were seriously challenged: the uprisings in the South and the war in Darfur (2004–2006) indicated the deep splits in the Sudanese society, especially between Arabs and non-Arabs. The atrocities committed during the fighting led to an international arrest warrant against Bashir by the International Criminal Court in 2009, making him the first president sentenced in office (Duursma-Müller 2019).

The break-away of South Sudan shook the legitimacy of the

[18] regime not only due to the loss of territory, but also by the loss of a significant portion of its oil wealth and arable land, on which the Sudanese ‘social contract’ was based. The armed conflict with South Sudan in 2012–2013 was a last effort to restore previous order and avoid the need to adapt to the new situation.

The deterioration of the Sudanese economy had a huge role in the outbreak of the December 2018 demonstrations. Due to the worsening of everyday life conditions, not only the public but also the business elites previously supporting Bashir turned against the President. While demonstrations were already held in 2012–2013, mostly by young people demanding political and economic reforms, then the armed forces brutally suppressed them (Tossell 2020, 4). Yet, in 2018–2019 the armed forces were split as to their reaction to the demonstrations, and it was the paramilitary *Rapid Support Forces* (RSF)⁵ that were shooting at the demonstrators and committing mass rapes to prevent active female participation, as the regular armed forces rejected the use of force against the demonstrators. Consequently, although in February 2019 Bashir promised reforms to the demonstrators, this proved too little too late, and in April – in a move to maintain the regime – the armed forces removed him from office.

Lebanon

The confessional political system of Lebanon built on a careful balance of the different confessions and clans faced a crisis in 1975 when this balance came to be so seriously challenged by the shifts in the demographic composition of the country that it led to a bloody civil war. The Taif Agreement of 1990 – closing down the civil war – in itself was as an attempt at adaptation: as the confessional system was maintained, the new *sectarian bargain* (Mackey 2008, 138–40) changed the ratios. It split the 128 parliamentary mandates equally between the Christians and the Muslims while preserving the precious concession-based division of power in effect since 1943. Conse-

⁵ The RSF has grown out from the *Janjaweed* militias, who committed grave atrocities against the non-Arab population in Darfur in 2004.



quently, this new sectarian bargain was not much more than a (partial) re-arrangement of the state model.

An eventual indigenous adaptation of the confessional system to the changing demographic dynamics, however, was challenged by the Syrian presence (1976–2005) and political interference. Although following the murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, Syrian troops had to leave Lebanon (Salloukh 2010, 134–40), relations with Syria dictated – from the outside – an element forcing further political adaptation.

[19]

Following the 2005 Cedar Revolution the Lebanese political spectrum was split into two: those Syria-friendly and those opposing Syrian engagement, while also maintaining the underlying sectarian divisions. The *March 8 Alliance* – which is close to the Assad regime – includes Shiite Hezbollah, has tried to fill the vacuum produced by the Cedar Revolution. The second – more genuine Lebanese group – is the Saad Hariri led, anti-Syrian *March 14 Movement* which consists of the Future Movement (popular among Sunni Muslims), the Lebanese Forces, the Kataib Party, the so-called Independence Movement, and Maronite Christians as well. The Qatar-mediated Doha Agreement in 2008 paved the way to a national unity government, yet the national dialogue initiated by former Commander of the Armed Forces Michel Suleyman failed to settle the struggle among the political parties and within the political elites (Hajjar 2009, 270–2).

The nation-wide demonstrations clearly signalled that a new phase started where the very essence of the confessional system was overruled by the people: in the 2011 people were demonstrating sectarianism with the slogan of ‘bread, knowledge and no to sectarianism’ – clearly reflecting a new stage in the Lebanese public identity, where economic concerns are/may prove more important than sectarian community relations. The Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war, however, put a rein on Lebanese public mobilization. Thus, it seemed that under the pressure of external developments, the system has re-consolidated itself. Yet, in 2015⁶ nation-wide

⁶ In the summer of 2015 in Naama, a place designated for garbage disposal the lo-

[20] demonstrations started again – over the *garbage crisis*, again a non-sectarian, non-ideological issue. Regular power cuts, increasing unemployment and the corruption of the political elites added to public frustration. Demonstrations, however, stopped in September–October without any meaningful solution to public concerns (Carmen 2019).

Yet again, on October 17, 2019 new nation-wide demonstrations broke out in reaction to new taxes – especially those on the otherwise free Facebook, Facetime, and WhatsApp calls – announced by the government. The *WhatsApp crisis* added to the public anger and frustration over the natural catastrophes hitting several parts of the countryside, forcing people and communities to leave their homes. As a result of the demonstrations Prime Minister Saad Hariri had to resign on October 29, but the demonstrators were openly demanding the exit of the whole of the political elite.

In all these political struggles, however, the Lebanese army notably remains usually neutral and does not interfere in politics or political rivalries. The country has had no military coups, and although there are ‘parallel armed forces’ controlled by non-state/semi-state actors, including Hezbollah, the military itself is the symbol of national unity. It is the only institution which can be considered independent, popular and free from sectarianism, a general characteristic of Lebanese society (Gaub 2017b, 119–29). Consequently, in the October 2019 demonstrations the armed forces were not perceived as a tool of the elites, but, to the contrary, as an actor standing up to corruption. This duality of the regular army and the non-state/semi-state militias was manifest in the ‘handling’ of the demonstrations: while in some places the military defended the demonstrators against the armed wings of the non-state/semi-state actor Hezbollah, in Beirut in some cases they used force to prevent street blockades.

cals closed the road leading to the disposal site in front of trucks carrying public garbage. Local demonstrations soon spread to the capital and mobilized the public – without any relevance to sectarian or ideological belongings – dissatisfied with government activities to handle the crisis. The so-called HIRAK demonstrations took some one hundred thousand people to the streets in August.



Iraq

The political transition following the 2003 Iraq War was completed by the 2005 constitution: the new federal system seemed to establish a democratic distribution of power among the main ethno-sectarian groups: the Sunni Arabs, the Shiite Arabs and the Kurds. However, with the memories of the past and foreign (American) troops on the ground, the new political system has come to be characterized by the so-called *muhassasa*, i.e. the division of the main state offices according to the ethno-religious affiliations, thus resembling the Lebanese confessional system. Yet, due to historical reasons, territory had a much closer relationship to the ethnic-religious communities than in Lebanon, thus any internal conflict was threatening with the break-up of the Iraqi state (Mansour 2019, 7; Abdullah 2018).

[21]

At the same time, the new constitution and the federal system strengthened the indigenous development of the Kurdish Autonomous Territory. The referendum on independence on September 25, 2017 (Mustafa 2021) could not achieve its aim, and besides losing practically all international support (gained by the Kurdish *peshmerga* fighting the Islamic State), it poisoned the relationship between the central Iraqi government and the Kurdish Regional Government.

The estrangement of the Sunni Arabs and the Kurdish referendum clearly reflected the crisis of the ‘democratic’ political order imposed from the outside and the ethno-religious model established after 2003. High unemployment, failing economic conditions and corruption resulted in the break-up of both the Shiite and the Kurdish alliances with intra-sectarian debates and clashes. The two new political groupings – *Binaa* and *Islah* – were organized across ethno-religious fault lines, on the basis of political considerations: *Binaa* supported close connections with Iran and a strong state; the *Islah* election coalition rejected Iranian or any other external influence (Mansour 2019, 11). The 2018 parliamentary elections proved that public concern was centred much more on corruption, the failure of government policies, power shortages or water management than on ethno-sectarian issues (yet again similarly to Lebanon).

[22] However, the political and economic marginalization of the Sunni Arab population, the moves by the Shiite majority Maliki government against Sunni politicians, and the sporadic clashes with the Iraqi armed forces produced a vacuum⁷ in the Sunni Arab territories, which paved the way in 2014 to the appearance and expansion of the Islamic State, resulting in a *quasi*-civil war ending only in 2018–2019. Although the new Iraqi armed forces – trained by the US military – were also mostly organized on the ethno-sectarian basis into parallel units, the failure to defend the country against the expansion of the Islamic State (Gaub 2017b, 102–9) resulted in the emergence of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) in the fight. These seemed to overstep sectarian divides by including not only Shiite militias, but Sunni Arab forces as well. Although in a new wave of ‘army-building’ they were legally integrated into the regular army in 2016, they are still operating independently.

This political trend of stepping over ethnic-religious fault lines has become increasingly manifest: while pre-2015 demonstrations were usually organized on a sectarian basis, from 2015 onwards public frustration was expressed independently from sectarian affiliations⁸ (Mansour 2019). The fall of the oil prices and the turn-up of the budgetary balance added to the break-down of public services and the decrease of water resources, which led to the outbreak of public unrest in Southern Iraq. By 2019 great cities were also scenes of mass demonstrations over the worsening living conditions, corruption and governmental incompetence. Demonstrators were rejecting the *muhassasa* system and demanded the departure from power of the post-2003 elites. Although the government announced a 13-point plan to terminate poverty, create jobs and improve living conditions, it was seen as too late, especially as the demonstrations and the reaction of the armed forces, including some of the PMUs,

⁷ Academic literature does not consider Iraq a ‘failed state,’ but speaks of a ‘state vacuum’ meaning that the state can only partially fulfill its tasks, some state functions are performed by non-state actors (Gaub 2017a).

⁸ In Shiite populated Basra demonstrations were taking place against the Nouri al-Maliki led Shiite political elites, and blamed the incompetence of their own Shiite leaders for the Islamic State expansion.



turned violent. In consequence, on November 29 Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi resigned (Bartu 2020b).

CONCLUSIONS

Following the decline of Arab nationalism in the 1960s–1970s the Arab Spring brought a kind of Arab renaissance in 2011, which, however, was complemented with ‘local’ Arab nationalisms, where loyalty and national identity was attached to the territorial states. Both in 2011 and in 2019 demonstrations were organized on a ‘national’ basis, rejecting ethnic and religious divisions. Although it can be claimed that ‘nationalism’ had been there before, at least in Algeria and Iraq – albeit in different forms and for different reasons – it had failed in Sudan with the break-away of South Sudan, while Lebanon, with its confessional state model, had so far been exempt from it. Yet, in post-2003 Iraq and in 2019 Lebanon demonstrators seemed not only ready for but were demanding the departure of the whole of the political elite, with whom they identified the political system. The fact that in both cases this model was imposed upon the countries from the outside, added to the crisis. Thus, the question in both states was if the ethno-sectarian structures can be renewed or an entirely different model – probably along ‘nationalist’ lines – would be established.

Nevertheless, though in all four states the political mainstream has moved from sectarian thinking towards issue-based politics. Protesters used to call for replacing the old political elites with a new one, however in itself it does not mean the end to the sectarian division of power.

The removal of the leaders – a demand in the 2011 demonstrations – in 2019 was also significant, yet, it did not mean either the fall of the regime or a drastic change in the political elites. Though neither of the cases in question can be considered a one-person dictatorship. While in Algeria and Sudan a ‘life-long leader’ was ousted from office, in Iraq and Lebanon there had been changes in the person of the leader in the preceding two decades.

Comparing the role of the armed forces in the four states, in Sudan and Algeria the military controlled (and even initiated) the tran-

[24] sition in a top-down approach, while in Lebanon and Iraq – for different reasons – they did not have a role in the political process. In another characteristic of the events, while in Algeria and Lebanon the use of force was not significant, in Sudan (the Khartoum massacre) and in Iraq the transition left many dead.

Thus, the 2019 demonstrations – especially taking into consideration the 2011 result – offer some general conclusions:

- The dissolution of the authoritarian regimes in general has not taken place. Instead, a kind of re-arrangement happened.
- The ethno-sectarian model seems to be overtaken by a ‘national’ understanding of the state.
- The political regimes are (still) in transition.
- The outcome of the transition depends on several factors, but the form it takes is difficult to forecast.
- While the macroeconomic indicators for the region are not worse than those of other regions, the transformation has negatively influenced the chances of the development of the MENA.

Following the 2011 and 2019 demonstrations, transition processes were defined to a great extent by the balance of power among the regime, the armed forces and the demonstrators. Based on their relative strength, two ways of transition can be identified: where the armed forces were dominating the political scene, a military-controlled top-down transition took place, while in case of a relative balance among the actors a negotiated transition could be expected, which, however, was still no guarantee of democratization in spite of the presence of civilians.

In Algeria and Sudan, with the starting point similar to that of Egypt, an Egypt-like transition started to unfold: the armed forces in defence of the state turned to the use of force to ensure survival (Stacher 2015) and took over political control and consolidated the system based on the primacy of the army (Dunne 2020, 187). In Lebanon and Iraq, where the political processes were defined more by the ethno-sectarian context than by the armed forces, protracted political debates started. This was aggravated by the fact that in



2019, while demonstrators were protesting without ideological considerations or a charismatic leader similar to 2011, their declared aim was the expulsion of the whole of the political elite and the change of the political system.

In sum, the 2019 demonstrations are not the beginning of a new era, but fit into the transformation started in the 2010/2011. Neither the *democratization theory* nor the *post-democratization discourse* is sufficient to describe the political processes undergoing in the region. The analysis found that demonstrations cannot be deduced from poor macroeconomic conditions alone, other factors have also been at play. In none of the four states were authoritarian regimes totally dissolved, their protracted transition has been taking place instead. It should also be noted that in all four the political regime is built on a weak state, which is favourable to the use of force (and to external influence). [25]

Adaptive authoritarianism, already manifest in 2011, was especially relevant in the handling of the 2019 demonstrations: the regime, the armed forces and the demonstrators have all undergone a socialization process, which brought along the more refined uses of force. The masses in the streets seem to have decision on their future in hand, however the reality is far from that. The survival capabilities of the regimes seem unlimited, and even among the conditions of a war economy they are able to re-produce the business and political elites interested in the maintenance and survival of the system.

Despite some common features of the regimes involved in this 2019 protest wave, this paper argues that each country has its own system to be transformed (see table 3). We can reach the conclusion that during the transformation process the initial political context is the factor, which most significantly determines the outcome of the reorganization of the system.

Having analysed the similarities and differences among the four states, the paper has reached the conclusion that the most plausible explanatory factor of transformation is the type of the initial political system. An authoritarian breakdown does not necessarily lead to democracy, but on the contrary, it may result in an authori-

TABLE 3 Comparative Analysis of the Four Cases

Country	Explanatory factors			
	Point of departure	The role of the armed forces	Collapse of the social contract	Ethno-sectarian tensions
[26] Algeria	Military regime	Refrain from repression, Egypt is the role model	Crisis of rentierism	Algerian national values propagated
Iraq	Muhassasa system	Paramilitary forces (PMU) play a significant role	Mismanagement of the government, lack of electricity	Crisis of the muhassasa system, protests not organized along sectarian lines
Lebanon	Confessional system	Neutral army, symbol of national unity	Garbage crisis, whatsapp tax	Crisis of the confessional system, protests not organized along sectarian lines
Sudan	Military regime	Khartoum massacre, Egypt is the role model	Loss of the hydro-carbon rich South Sudan	Sudanese national values propagated

tarian transformation, which is the case with most of the countries affected either by the first or second wave of the protests. Certain geopolitical and historical factors could explain why protests have erupted in 2019 only in some countries in the Arab World.

The corona virus pandemic put the regimes to a further test of the social contract, when it led to limits on public life. However, it gave a boost to the political networks and networking in the virtual sphere. Although the eventual expressions of public frustration are difficult to forecast, some tendencies – sometimes even contradicting each other – can be pointed out.

Rentier states, Algeria and Iraq, highly dependent on oil and gas incomes, are further exposed to the significant drop of global prices, which will have an impact on current state budgets, increasing the



very same concerns that led to the 2019 demonstrations. Sudan with the break-away of South Sudan lost its hydrocarbon resources and ceased to be a rentier state. Thus, the rentier economic character exposes a vulnerability – practically outside the competence of the state or the regime – yet, with serious consequences for both. While Lebanon does not fall in this category, the re-start of the demonstrations and further instability may be expected, as public expenditure and state subventions will have to be cut. The pandemic crisis, not well handled, can further aggravate social unrest and erode regime stability (Pack and Mason 2020). [27]

On the other hand, in case of crises like these, citizens are more dependent on state authorities including the armed forces, which practically unites the state and the population against the unknown external adversary. The measures introduced to fight the pandemic, at the same time as putting constraints on the constitution, such as the state of emergency, may provide additional legal tools to the elites in power in order to marginalize opponents without the use of force.

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