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Building Democracy on the Ashes of Authoritarianism in the Arab World: Workshop Summary

By Laurel E. Miller and Jeffrey Martini

Key Insights

- Newly elected leaders in Arab transition states are facing enormous popular demands that go beyond political reforms to include improvements in economic outcomes and the provision of public services.

- The unity engendered by the Arab revolutions has given way, in several countries, to severe political polarization. Forging of cross-ideological coalitions among Islamist and secular groups is critical to avoiding this dynamic.

- The effects of authoritarian legacies are country-specific, and it is not clear that any Arab transition state is more disadvantaged than another. But each state must address its authoritarian legacies in order to build a functioning democratic system.

- Political transitions bring the promise of positive change but also introduce the risk of excessive attachment to identities during periods of uncertainty. Respect for minority rights and some decentralization of power are useful for allaying the concerns of potential spoilers and building support for national identities.

- New Arab leaders are facing a balancing act in their implementation of transitional justice. They must prioritize reconciliation to build inclusive, stable political orders, while at the same time demonstrating to their publics that there will be accountability for past abuses.

- All the Arab transition states are faced with a need for security system reform. This, along with election assistance, is an area where the international community is well positioned to help.

- Arab political and civil society leaders are examining historical experiences of democratization in other regions to distill best practices that can inform their own political development. Making these lessons accessible and testing their portability to the Arab world is one way the international community can support democratization in this region.

After popular uprisings toppled authoritarian leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya in 2011 and precipitated a negotiated power transfer in Yemen in early 2012, it quickly became commonplace to observe that ousting a disliked regime was easier than replacing it with something better. The challenges that come after regime change—building new, more open political systems and responding to popular expectations of improved living conditions—have come to the fore. Political and social upheavals have been on full display as politicians, activists, and publics at large have struggled to define new rules for wielding government power and new relationships between states and societies. In some instances, the need to reform deeply entrenched institutional ways and means has become apparent, and in others, the need to create entirely new state institutions has become evident. And the upheavals have exacerbated economic problems that already existed.

That these processes of political, economic, and social change have been slow and arduous is unsurprising given the similarly difficult experiences of many other countries around the world as they emerged from long periods of authoritarian rule. Nevertheless, the reality that such changes come neither quickly nor easily has frustrated many leaders and citizens of the countries affected. Indeed, the dramatic and participatory nature of the Arab Spring uprisings seems to have made the gap between popular expectations of change and actual results particularly pronounced, especially in comparison to some of the more protracted top-down or negotiated transitions in other parts of the world.

Against this backdrop, the RAND Corporation and the International Strategic Research Organization (USAK) jointly convened a workshop in Istanbul, Turkey,

on April 24, 2013, to explore the policies and practical measures that Arab countries undergoing political transitions can adopt to build enduring democratic institutions and practices. The purpose of the workshop was to provide a private setting in which policymakers, opinion leaders, and experts from Arab countries could reflect collaboratively on how to overcome obstacles to democratization. RAND and USAK sought to facilitate sharing of experiences across the borders of countries in transition, through informal discussion in a roundtable format. It was agreed that no part of the discussion would be attributed publicly to particular participants.

Workshop participants came from Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Jordan. They included political party leaders, former ministers, current officials and senior political advisers, heads of research institutions, academics, and columnists. Participants' political affiliations varied considerably on the ideological spectrum, though the nature of the discussions was notably pragmatic rather than ideological.

Under the broad banner of the workshop title—*Building Democracy on the Ashes of Autocracy: The Way Ahead for Arab Countries in Transition*—participants focused on four main topics: approaches to developing new political systems and political parties; security threats to democratization; the role of regional neighbors and the international community in supporting democratization; and lessons that can be learned from past experiences in other parts of the world. Participants also discussed Turkey's democratization experience following a luncheon address on the topic, and the challenges presented by the conflict in Syria.

This summary does not record the entire scope of the discussion but instead highlights some important themes that emerged throughout the workshop. In particular, it focuses on points raised by participants that likely will be of interest broadly to policymakers, civil society activists, and others concerned with the prospects for democratization in Arab countries that have experienced uprisings and regime changes since 2011.

PROBLEMS OF POLARIZATION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR POLITICAL CONSENSUS

Workshop participants expressed considerable anxiety about political polarization in the transition countries. Polarization was seen as setting in very soon after the uprisings and regime changes. Participants saw a need to develop consensus, but it was not apparent that there was a shared understanding of the meaning of the concept. Some indicated that a consensus approach to politics would mean that a broad array of political parties would each have a share of decisionmaking, while others emphasized that the essence of consensus was agreement on the rules of the political playing field. The discussion of this issue reflected the ongoing struggle in these countries to redefine the essential nature of politics in newly competitive systems.

The lack of broad agreement on the political rules of the game was seen by some as a particular problem in Egypt. The introduction of competitive politics and adoption of a constitution—while the fundamental rules remained contested—contributed, in this view, to significant polarization. One of the participants from Egypt noted that while it is in vogue for Egyptian leaders to call for consensus, there is a lack of willingness by political groups to make the tough concessions necessary to achieve it. Another Egyptian participant raised the question of whether the winners of the Egyptian revolution were incapable of building a democratic system because they themselves are undemocratic in nature.

The situation is Egypt was contrasted with Tunisia, where a slower, more deliberate transition process has produced greater consensus and stability. The ability of Tunisia's main Islamist party and two secular parties to partner in forming a government was lauded by participants as an example of the type of cross-ideological coalitions lacking in other transitioning countries.

A variety of participants' comments throughout the workshop suggested that lack of experience with negotiating differences in the political sphere has led to some fear of disagreement. On the one hand, there was a view that political polarization was a slippery slope to civil conflict, in the absence of a deeply rooted democratic culture and in the shadow of popular uprisings—several of which, especially Libya's, involved the use of violence. And even where civil conflict appeared unlikely, there were genuine fears that democratization in the region could manifest as strict majoritarianism.

As a helpful counterpoint, however, one participant noted that the Arab Spring countries' experiences with democratic processes are not as thin as commonly assumed. The participant noted that Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya had some exposure to democratic processes in the colonial and/or monarchical periods of their histories. The same participant also noted that open political disagreement should actually be considered a major achievement of the revolutions, given the absence of open political discourse under the former regimes. In this view, disagreement could be seen as a building block of politics. Conversely,

elevating consensus and stability above the fractious politics of democracy could lead to the emergence of new dictatorships. In order to realize the benefits of political disagreement, however, the rules of the game need to be crystallized.

Several participants highlighted the importance of avoiding the creation of political arrangements that reinforce sectarian and tribal affiliations. In this respect, both the Lebanese and the Iraqi political systems were referenced as negative examples. Participants expressed concern that, in these cases, explicit or implicit quota systems were established along ethnic and sectarian lines. This had the salutary effect of co-opting potential spoilers and ensuring minority representation. But these arrangements also have hardened the political salience of identities and stifled the development of interest groups based on shared principles rather than lineage or blood ties. Libya, Syria, and Yemen were all cited as potentially at risk of falling prey to conflicts dominated by tribal, sectarian, and regional loyalties. One participant pointed out the need for more research and analysis on how to overcome the challenges of establishing democracies in contexts of sectarian and tribal divisions.

Participants expressed varying views on whether the Arab uprisings were motivated by a desire for democracy or by other interests, including better living conditions. One participant believed the revolution in his country was basically driven by an "opportunity deficit" and that people genuinely believed freedom would translate into jobs. Others saw the revolutions as encompassing broader political and human rights demands. This question was considered relevant to whether the transitions are based on widely shared objectives. A participant noted that a common theme across the revolutions was the quest for dignity (*karāma*) but that this broad and subjective concept is a difficult one to translate into a concrete political program. At least one participant considered the absence of democratic culture to be an obstacle to national dialogue on objectives.

THE DISPARATE IMPACT OF AUTHORITARIAN LEGACIES

A particular focus of discussion was the differing implications of revolutions that removed the top political leadership but left the state bureaucracy intact (e.g., Egypt and Tunisia) as compared with revolutions that disposed of the entire state apparatus (e.g., Libya and potentially Syria). There was acknowledgement that in the former cases, bureaucratic continuity provides some useful measure of stability but also creates the challenge of reforming state institutions populated with individuals who have vested interests in the pre-revolution status quo.

Participants observed that in Tunisia, the bureaucracy prevented the disintegration of the state but has been unable to solve problems quickly. A Tunisian participant noted that the challenge was particularly pronounced there, given the legacy of France having established a "heavy" bureaucracy in which half the state's budget goes to administration costs. In Egypt, there is also a large public sector whose main interest is in securing state benefits rather than implementing change. To put the size of this sector in perspective, an Egyptian participant noted that Egypt has more bureaucrats than the entire population of Libya. And, as noted by several participants, there is an uneasy relationship between Egypt's new Islamist leadership and pre-existing institutions, such as the military, internal security services, and the judiciary, which further complicates an already fraught transition.

Some participants saw institutional continuity as an advantage in checking the infusion of ideology into the new political systems, while others were more inclined to see institutional continuity as a manifestation of the "deep state." Related to the latter view, some saw the revolutions as unfinished in many respects; in Egypt, for instance, the former system was not a one-man show performed by former President Hosni Mubarak alone, so many elements of his regime remain in place.

Regarding Libya, there was considerable discussion of the particular challenges involved in building the state from scratch. Because the regime of Muammar Qadhafi was highly personalistic and sought to keep state institutions as weak as possible to avoid the emergence of alternative power bases, Libyans are faced with the challenge of creating a state virtually

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on a blank slate. While this has liberated Libya's new leadership from doing battle with sclerotic bureaucracies, it also means they are operating in a vacuum that can be exploited by competing sources of power. Specifically, this situation has exacerbated the challenge of demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of Libya's militias. The crux of the problem is that Libya's militias are stronger than the state's security forces, diminishing the leverage that political leaders have to disband militias or bring them under state control.

Despite the differences in the nature of authoritarian legacies across the transition countries, participants echoed similar themes on their overall impact. For example, it was noted that one of the most debilitating legacies imparted by authoritarian rule was the reinforcement of a winner-take-all mentality among political competitors. This has manifested itself in institutions staffed on the basis of political loyalty rather than merit, and in the politicization of the apparatus of the state. Among ascendant political forces, this dynamic is reflected in a propensity toward unilateral decisionmaking rather than coalition-building. Among opposition forces, symptoms of this winner-take-all attitude include election boycotts, street politics, and use of force. As yet, the concept of political coalitions lacks roots.

Several participants pointed out that some aspects of the authoritarian legacies have historical pedigrees that far predate the recently removed regimes. In particular, the concept of "pharoahism"—that is, of power emanating from the will of the leader rather than from the people—is prevalent in the region. In modern times, this traditional conception of power has gone hand-in-hand with implementation of measures to restrain development of civil society and has shaped ways of thinking among both elites and the general public. Mindset changes are now needed at all levels of society.

There were several suggestions as to how to overcome authoritarian legacies. One participant noted the need to

change incentive structures so as to foster a culture of investment in the future as opposed to short-term rent seeking. Because the previous regimes lacked popular legitimacy, a common governing strategy was to purchase support through patronage politics. One consequence of this approach is that many Arabs continue to see the relationship between governments and citizens as the former providing rents to the latter. In this equation, citizens are reduced to passive recipients of government support. In an especially blunt assessment, one participant noted that many Arab societies have evolved directly from Bedouin societies to welfare states, arguing that there is a need for new thinking in which Arabs take pride in creating productive enterprises and building governing arrangements based on consent.

Another important—but challenging—step is to socialize populations to the principles and practices of law abidance. This is an example of the types of social and cultural changes that are needed to underpin democracy. Framing the issue, one participant asked which comes first in democratization: culture or structure? He regarded it as an open question whether a semblance of democratic institutions was necessary to foster democratic culture or whether those institutions could only come into being in the presence of democratic culture.

Development of popular legitimacy for the new regimes was also seen as crucial to moving away from the authoritarian past. Among participants from Libya and Yemen, in particular, there was acknowledgment that this will likely require some ceding of authorities to localities. Even if federalism is not adopted, there was an appreciation by workshop participants that decentralization will likely be required to gain the support of populations that have either been neglected or actively suppressed by central governments in the past. In Syria, the state's predatory character has already created the conditions for self-rule with communities organizing at a local level to provide what services they can.

Another participant suggested that it would be useful for Arab transition countries to examine lessons from reconciliation processes that have been pursued in countries such as South Africa and Liberia. A participant noted that Egyptians seeking revenge for past injustices would do well to consider that such retribution was not pursued in South Africa even after the brutality of apartheid. A Tunisian participant who personally suffered repression under the regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was quick to note that the revolution there sought broad changes but was never about revenge. A challenge facing policymakers, however, is that the publics in Arab

transition countries have tended to view reconciliation as code for return of the old regime. Thus, there are strong political incentives for newly elected politicians to hold former regime officials accountable.

Participants also discussed reconciliation in broad terms, such as the importance of embracing economic elites who left after the uprisings and took their savings with them. Tunisian and Libyan participants noted the need to attract these individuals back home in order to spur economic development. The challenge, as they saw it, was not just to reassure those individuals that they would be safe from reprisals but also to out-compete the exiles' new host countries, which have strong interests in absorbing them as sources of foreign investment.

Some of the risks in contending with authoritarian legacies were also highlighted. For instance, some concern was expressed that the need to weed out remnants of the old systems can at times be used as a pretext for retaliation against disfavored individuals or groups. In this context, the vexing question was raised whether the old systems should be regarded as consisting of particular practices that should be discarded, or particular individuals. It was noted that, to help ensure stability, caution should be exercised in defining what "remnants of the old regime" means; transitional justice processes are needed to deal with this question.

SECURITY THREATS TO DEMOCRATIZATION

Some participants expressed concern that insecurity or the potential for insecurity in the transition countries could be used as an excuse to prevent democratization, as has been done in the past. Security forces will need to be watched closely to ensure that they do not try to thwart democracy. In addition, one Egyptian participant worried that the risk of instability in that country could lead the police-state mentality of the old regime to persist. It was revealing, he noted, that the January 25th Revolution was launched on Egypt's "Police Day;" one motivation for the uprising was opposition to police tactics and police control over society. Under the former regime, the police were "everywhere" in terms of their presence, but "also nowhere" in the sense that they did not actually help and protect people when needed.

Internal insecurity in Libya was regarded as an especially significant risk to democratization. The militias have gained strength since the end of the conflict that ousted Qadhafi, in part because the government has sanctioned and paid them. A participant estimated the number of genuine Libyan revolutionaries at 15,000–20,000, whereas the number receiving state salaries as part of Libya's demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration programs is a quarter of a million. The government's approach to incorporating militias into the security architecture helped stabilize the country but also created powerful structures that are now stifling the process of democratization. There have been instances of militias threatening members of parliament and otherwise becoming increasingly forceful in interfering in politics, using the rationale of preventing the old system from returning.

Participants did not view the integration of militias as having been handled well so far, and expressed the importance of learning from past mistakes. A participant described the militia problem in Libya as a "Frankenstein" partly created by the transitional authorities' approach to demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration. Ways need to be found to create opportunities for militia members to see a future for themselves that does not involve use of violence. Moreover, a clearer and more detailed understanding of Libya's security problems is needed. It will remain difficult to develop sound policies without a better grasp of even the basic facts of weapons flows and how many people are in the militia.

More broadly in the region, insecurity could undermine democratization by reinforcing ethnic and sectarian identities. It was noted that the civil war currently being fought in Syria is having this deeply damaging effect. A Syrian participant noted that the Assads (Hafez and Bashar) had destroyed "social solidarity," pitting community against community in a way that atomized society. The result, he said, was a Hobbesian situation in which there was a complete absence of trust. Moreover, the regime's response to the uprising is creating potentially insurmountable barriers to any post-conflict reconciliation. Given the magnitude of the bloodshed, the participant said that he could not imagine, for example, an Allawi officer walking in Aleppo in the next 50 years. In other countries as well, lack of interpersonal trust among citizens could lead to overemphasis on sectarian identity because people feel their group will protect them.

To try to address this problem in Yemen, a proposal was made during the ongoing "national dialogue" to craft a constitutional provision preventing any tribe or locality from having more than 10 percent representation in any security institution, but the idea was rejected. A participant commented that this idea seems appealing as a way of ensuring that security

forces are not captured by particular groups, but could actually reinforce tribal affiliations and thus further divide an already divided Yemeni society.

Another participant noted that it is also important to think about security in terms of the interests of average citizens who want protection from state institutions' arbitrary interference in their daily lives. This type of protection is what many meant by their demands for freedom during the uprisings. Conceiving of security in this way will help to advance the development of state legitimacy, which cannot be gained through coercive measures. Mechanisms need to be put in place to control the arbitrary use of coercive power against citizens. Although the challenge of security institution reform is daunting, a participant noted that it is also one of the few priorities on which many citizens agree. Egyptians, for instance, may disagree about the amount of religion they want in public life or how to interpret the popular demand for "social justice," but, according to this participant, all Egyptians back police reform.

Another pointed out that security is intimately connected to economic development. This participant noted that Arabs need to broaden their conception of security reform to include other dimensions, such food security, water security, and the social contract between rulers and citizens of the state.

INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL RESPONSES TO THE UPRISINGS: MORE INTERFERENCE THAN HELP

In Libya, participants perceived regional powers to be meddling in dangerous ways rather than helping the new government—for example, by supporting militia groups and encouraging political parties to create their own militias. Arms were still being shipped into Libya to support various factions. In Yemen, too, participants saw many regional as well as international actors playing for their own interests. A participant noted that all Yemeni politics takes place within the shadow of Saudi Arabia and that some conflicts in Yemen, like the Houthi rebellion in the north, are really a product of strategic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Participants' interest in exchanges of knowledge and technical expertise with the international community was highlighted. The revolutions produced heightened social demands, and meeting those expectations is proving very difficult. Help is needed in improving the efficiency of social programs, developing state institutions, and reforming internal security organs so

that they serve the interests of the public at large. It was emphasized, though, that the international community should support transition *processes*, not individuals or parties, and should not try to pick "winners" of the Arab Spring. One participant framed the fine line the international community must walk as "mediating but not intervening."

One area in which the international community received high marks was on electoral support in Tunisia and Libya. Both held successful elections for constituent assemblies and participants acknowledged the work of United Nations missions such as the United Nations Support Mission in Libya and help from groups such as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, the National Democratic Institute, and the Carter Center. Credit was also given to the United Nations Development Program for raising awareness through the series of Arab Human Development Reports that documented the various "deficits" in the region. One participant cited the European Union partnership negotiations as an impetus for the original Damascus Spring in 2000, which he saw as a precursor to the current uprising.

The United States, however, was seen by participants as having lost interest in the region, leaving its destiny to regional actors. Libyans, for instance, want more U.S. and European involvement, especially in developing security institutions, and want closer economic and security relationships. A Libyan participant bemoaned the "light footprint" approach as an overcorrection for U.S. missteps in Iraq. Help with developing security institutions is sorely needed in Yemen as well, where the state's presence is almost totally lacking in tribal areas and movement can be secured only under "tribal protection."

There was also a critique that the efficacy of U.S. assistance was undermined by conditions that the assistance would be tied to use of American goods and services. A participant questioned who the real beneficiary is when assistance dollars are captured by U.S. companies and organizations implementing aid programs. One practical suggestion for addressing what some participants saw as a lack of Western government support for the Arab transitions was to think in terms of public-private partnerships. For example, Western governments could reach out to the private sectors in their countries to encourage foreign direct investment, or even urge citizens to take holidays in Egypt and Tunisia, where tourism is the biggest sector of the economies.

Finally, several participants flipped the assumed direction of international assistance on its head. One argued that a resource-rich transitioning country like Libya should actually

be a source as much as a recipient of international assistance. In particular, this participant saw an opportunity for Libya to invest in its poorer neighbors to the south as a way of enhancing stability on its borders. Another participant noted that the transitioning countries in the region have as much to learn from each other as from outside actors. He asked rhetorically, "if there is not cooperation between Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia now, when will there be?"

COMPARING ARAB POLITICAL TRANSITIONS TO PAST EXAMPLES AROUND THE WORLD

A common theme in the discussion was that there is no single model for democratization; rather, there are a variety of comparative experiences to draw upon and an assortment of good practices from which to select. In general, participants showed a keen interest in benefitting from the experiences of other countries that underwent democratic transitions of their own.

So, for example, a participant working on judicial reform in Egypt was interested in what lessons could be gleaned from Latin America's experience with this issue. Another participant focused on political party development pointed out similarities between the proliferation of parties in newly democratic Spain in the 1970s and the emergence of many parties in Tunisia after its revolution, and noted that the number of parties in Spain gradually diminished over time.

Several participants commented that they were looking to different European states with presidential, parliamentary, or mixed systems to learn about the advantages and disadvantages of each system of governance. One suggested the importance of focusing on economic lessons from past transitions, including economic problems suffered in Russia after the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Participants also struck a note of caution about latching on to models or ideal types, however. Several noted that publics were seeking to emulate the "Dubai model" without considering the unique conditions that have allowed Dubai to flourish economically, to say nothing of the conflation of positive economic outcomes with genuine political freedom.

Similar points were made about overly simplistic readings of Turkey's democratization experience, an oft-cited regional model. Participants noted the need to differentiate between different aspects of the so-called Turkish model—e.g., Islamist inclusion, economic success, and the military as a stabilizing

force. Others noted the limits of transferring lessons from Turkey to the Arab world given what they saw as differences in the depth of religiosity in public life.

Regarding comparisons between Arab transitions and democratization experiences elsewhere in the world, one participant pointed out that it is important not to think about Arab countries' lack of experience with democratic culture in an "orientalist" way. Western countries such as Spain, for instance, did not have a democratic culture before democratization occurred there. Among the Arab countries now undergoing transition, even Libya is not entirely an empty space in terms of understanding democracy; while there is a lack of bureaucratic skills, there was some experience with participatory politics under the rule of King Idris, including the drafting of a constitution.

One participant pointed out that it will also be important not to judge Arab transitions by different standards than transitions elsewhere. If Islamist political parties fail to achieve results in Egypt or Tunisia (for example, in terms of economic development), this might be seen outside the Arab world as a failure of an Islamist model, rather than just the failure of particular political parties as has occurred in other transition countries. That perspective would ignore the fact that these parties have gained power so far *through* democratic processes, not by imposing some sort of Islamist model.

Finally, participants noted that a lesson they have taken from considering past democratization experiences is that the political transitions in their own countries will take many years to unfold. One participant observed that, because the revolutions were not intellectual revolutions, acquiring "democratic knowledge"—the "what" and the "how" of democracy—is only beginning. This sort of knowledge does not fall from the sky; it must be cultivated over time.

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