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After the Arab Spring

PEOPLE STILL WANT DEMOCRACY

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Democratization often comes in waves, and in early 2011 some observers believed that a wave similar to the one that washed over Eastern Europe in 1989 might finally be affecting the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).¹ Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya all saw longtime dictators making forced exits (with NATO bombing helping things along in the last country). Late in 2011, Yemen's semi-authoritarian president agreed to step down.

Yet the optimism was short-lived.² In March 2011, Bahraini armed forces, with military support from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, violently expelled protesters from the Pearl Roundabout in central Manama. In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad cracked down brutally on a small protest movement, and a savage civil war swiftly broke out. As this conflict grew in size and intensity, it became clear that there would be no NATO or other Western intervention.³ Since 2011, no other longstanding regime has fallen, and strife has touched a number of other places in the region.

Were the uprisings and the events associated with them really a region-wide wave driven by a unified Arab public? Did they amount to a demand for democracy in the Arab world? And is the uprisings' almost universal failure to produce democratic transitions a signal that citizens in the region have given up on democracy?

To shed light on these questions, I examine the results of the second and third waves of the Arab Barometer (*arabbarometer.org*), a group of face-to-face public-opinion surveys conducted across the MENA region in 2010 and 2011 (Wave 2) and from 2012 through 2014 (Wave 3). These surveys yield the perhaps surprising finding that the effect of the

Arab uprisings and their aftermath on MENA public opinion regarding democracy has been rather small. Despite all the turmoil, relatively few citizens throughout the region have changed their views either about the degree to which their respective countries are democratic, or about democracy's desirability.

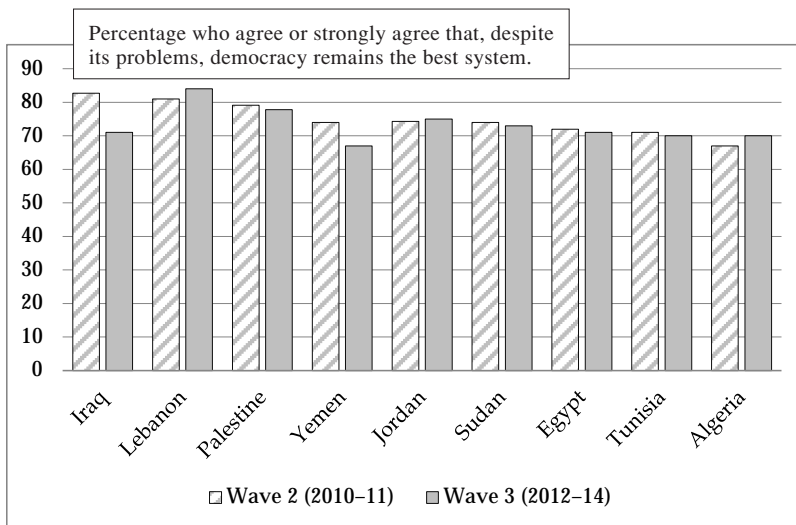
The Arab uprisings were less a cry for democracy than a demand for better governance and improved economic performance. Few citizens across the region directly attributed to democracy itself the changes, good or bad, that the uprisings brought. By this measure at least, the uprisings and the events that followed did little to dampen the overall demand for democracy in the region as a whole. Citizens have continued to believe, as they did before the protests, that democracy is the best form of government and that the regimes in their countries have a long way to go to become fully democratic.

Tunisia, the place where the Arab uprisings began and the site of the greatest progress toward democracy since then, represents an exception to this broader trend in public opinion. Since the Jasmine Revolution of 2011, Tunisians have grown increasingly concerned about the effects of democracy and have become less likely to say that this system is suitable for their country. Despite these trends, however, the vast majority of Tunisians continue to say that democracy, whatever its problems, is the best system of government for their country.

As the Tunisian case suggests, Arab publics are responding mainly to developments at home rather than to wider regional factors. Thus Egyptians, unlike Tunisians, have been disinclined to hold democracy responsible for their country's rocky political course, and instead have blamed the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam. This decision about where to place blame in turn reflects factors specific to the political situation as it has unfolded in Egypt since dictator Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign in February 2011.

The Arab Barometer surveys are designed to be nationally representative of men and women aged 18 and older from across the MENA region. The Barometer's second wave more or less coincided with the Arab uprisings. The third wave, conducted from December 2012 through early 2014, took place well after the uprisings and covered twelve countries. The nine countries that were surveyed in both waves—Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen—are included in the analysis that follows.

Prior to the Arab uprisings, support for democracy was widespread throughout the MENA region, and the level of such support region-wide was among the highest in the world.⁴ At the time of the Arab uprisings, at least three-quarters of citizens in all nine of the countries listed above said that a democratic political system, including public freedoms, equality of political and civil rights, and accountability of authority, represents a good or very good type of system. In the years that fol-

FIGURE—IS DEMOCRACY THE BEST SYSTEM?

lowed, this hardly changed. About two years after the uprisings, clear majorities continued to hold this view. In fact, at least eight in ten respondents in each of the nine countries said that democracy was a good or very good system.

Not only do citizens hold favorable attitudes toward democracy, but vast majorities also agree that democracy, despite its problems, is the best political system (see Figure above). At the time of the Arab uprisings, at least two-thirds in all nine countries rated democracy as the best system. About two years later, at least two-thirds in each country were still calling democracy the best system. Notably, public opinion about democracy remained virtually unchanged in both Egypt and Tunisia, despite the transitions taking place in both countries. There was a small decline, however, in two countries—Iraq and Yemen—where citizens were 12 and 7 points less likely, respectively, to rate democracy as best. Since both countries are weak states divided along sectarian lines, it may be that this decline is linked to fears that democracy could inflame sectarian conflict.⁵ For the region as a whole, however, support remains high and relatively stable.

Citizens may judge democracy the best form of government without seeing it as the only viable one. The degree to which citizens associate various societal problems with democracy shapes their commitment to this system: If significant problems are viewed as byproducts of democracy, citizens are less likely to support it over potential alternatives.

In order to evaluate commitment to democracy, I examine four failings sometimes associated with democratic governance: 1) weak economic performance; 2) the inability to maintain stability; 3) indecisiveness; and 4) ordinary citizens' lack of preparedness for this type of

TABLE—LEVEL OF CONCERN ABOUT DEMOCRACY*

Country	Wave 2	Wave 3	Difference
Algeria	24	19	-5
Egypt	26	27	1
Iraq	32	28	-4
Jordan	41	42	1
Lebanon	32	36	5
Palestine	43	42	-1
Sudan	40	29	-11
Tunisia	24	47	23
Yemen	37	35	-2

*Numbers average the percentages of respondents agreeing with the following statements: 1) “Democracy is bad for the economy,” 2) “Democracy is ineffective at maintaining order,” 3) “Democracy is indecisive,” and 4) “Citizens are unprepared for democracy.”

governance. Autocrats have long pointed to these failings when trying to blunt calls for democracy, yet only a minority of respondents in each country attributed such problems to democracy. In most countries, the level of concern expressed about them did not change much in response to the Arab uprisings (see Table above).

Few Arab citizens believe that democracy is harmful to the economy. At the time of the uprisings, only a minority in all countries agreed with the statement that “under a democratic system the country’s economic performance is weak.” This belief was most widespread in Jordan (39 percent), followed by Sudan (37 percent), and Yemen and Palestine (36 percent each). Elsewhere, far fewer held this view, including in Egypt and Tunisia (19 and 18 percent, respectively).

Although the uprisings led to significant economic dislocations, including drops in foreign investment and tourism across the region, two years later no more than 40 percent blamed democracy. Moreover, in two countries, Sudan (-9 points) and Iraq (-6), there was a substantial decline in the share of those saying that democracy would hurt the economy. Across the region as a whole, the uprisings had little effect on this perception.

Tunisia, the site of the most significant democratic reforms, stands as a major exception to this broader trend. From 2011 to 2013, the share of Tunisians who saw democracy as bad for the economy doubled from 18 to 36 percent. The rising worry, moreover, was fairly evenly distributed across all major demographic groups. Growing numbers of Tunisians from every background were thus associating negative economic outcomes with the political transformation that followed the Jasmine Revolution.

Few Arab publics blame democracy for the rise in regional instability that followed the uprisings. In 2011, less than two-fifths of all citizens

agreed that democratic regimes are ineffective at maintaining order and stability. Citizens in Jordan and Palestine were the most likely to hold this view (38 percent in each), but elsewhere the figure was much lower, ranging from 24 percent in Iraq to 17 percent in Tunisia. Two years after the uprisings, the beliefs of publics in most Arab countries remained more or less unchanged, although there was a statistically significant decline in two countries: Sudan (-9 points) and Algeria (-5). On the whole, Arab citizens did not see democracy as the cause behind the instability that besets their region.

Tunisia, however, again proved an exception. From the second-wave survey to the third, those worrying about democracy's implications for stability went from 17 to 41 percent. Rising terrorist attacks, including the February 2013 assassination of leading politician Chokri Belaid—who was gunned down outside his Tunis home as the survey was being taken—likely fed fears that democracy means insecurity.

Results for the final two survey items—"democracies are indecisive" and "citizens are not prepared for democracy"—reveal similar overall trends. At the time of the Arab uprisings, fewer than half of citizens across all countries in the survey considered democracy indecisive. Two years later, respondents in most countries showed no significant change. As for the belief that citizens lack preparedness for democracy, its incidence held steady or declined slightly in eight of the nine countries studied.

The exception once again was Tunisia, where concern about these aspects of democracy increased markedly. From the second wave to the third, the share of Tunisians rating democracy as indecisive rocketed from 20 to 50 percent. This likely reflected the perceived sluggish pace of reform and the National Constituent Assembly's inability to produce a draft constitution by the time of the survey. Additionally, Tunisians in 2013 were 18 points more likely than they had been in 2011 to say that their fellow citizens were unprepared for democracy (60 versus 42 percent). Thus on all four measures Tunisia stood out from the region as a whole.

Democratic Development

To gauge how citizens perceive their own political systems, the Arab Barometer asks respondents to rate the degree to which their country is democratic on a scale of zero to ten, with zero being fully authoritarian and ten being fully democratic. Contrary to many common external narratives, at the time of the uprisings most Arab publics did not believe that they were living under fully authoritarian systems.⁶ In seven of the nine countries surveyed, the average rating was between four and five on this scale. Thus, most believed that they lived under a hybrid system that was only moderately more authoritarian than democratic in nature.

Citizenries whose countries had vastly different political histories and backgrounds gave out similar ratings. In October 2011, Tunisians (4.5) rated their system as less democratic than their neighbors in Algeria (4.8), a country that external observers such as Freedom House consider to be less democratic. Similarly, despite a recent history of relatively free and fair elections, Iraqis rated their system at 4.1, which is barely higher than Sudan (4.2), one of the least democratic countries in the world by some measures.

In the Arab Barometer's second wave, citizens in two countries rated their respective nations as being marginally closer to democracy than authoritarianism. The first was Egypt (5.6), where the survey was conducted in June 2011, shortly after the revolution but before fresh elections or a new constitution had materialized. The second was Jordan (6.0), where, despite having a monarchy with a relatively weak parliament, citizens have long seen their system as closer to democracy.⁷

The Arab uprisings not only sparked major transformations in some countries, such as Egypt and Tunisia, but also spurred limited reforms in others, among them Algeria, Jordan, and Morocco.⁸ Despite all these changes, however, publics across the region in 2013 tended to rate their regimes as no more or less democratic than had been the case in 2011. Tunisians, for example, had experienced free and fair elections but were still no more likely to say that their regime was democratic. Yemenis also were no more likely to say their country was democratic, despite the recent removal from power of a long-ruling semi-autocratic president.

In fact, in only two of the nine countries did citizen-conferred democratic ratings differ by more than a point from the second wave to the third. In Egypt, the rating fell to just 3.3 in April 2013 (prior to the July 2013 coup), the lowest of any country in the survey. In other words, the occurrence of free and fair elections after many decades without them had somehow left *fewer* Egyptians than before believing that their system was democratic. How to explain this seeming inconsistency? Perhaps respondents were rating their country's democratic development based on their attitudes toward the government in power, dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, rather than on procedural grounds.

Although Arab publics may rate their own countries as more democratic than would many external observers, it remains clear that most Arab citizens still find the systems under which they live to be far from fully democratic. Yet despite tending to agree that democracy is the best system of government, many an Arab citizen still worries about whether democracy is right for his or her own country. Using another zero-to-ten scale, the Arab Barometer asks respondents to rate the degree to which democracy is suitable for their country, with zero being completely unsuitable and ten being fully suitable. At the time of the Arab uprisings, in most countries the rating was between five and six. In the two exceptions, Sudan (6.1) and Egypt (6.8), the levels

were marginally higher. Thus, despite democracy being their preferred system, many Arabs appear to harbor concerns about how it would function in their region.

Again, the events that followed the Arab uprisings brought only minor changes in the opinions of most Arab publics regarding democracy's suitability. Roughly two years after the uprisings, mean ratings of the suitability of democracy differed by a point or more in only three of the nine countries surveyed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, two of the three were Egypt and Tunisia. In both, the mean rating declined significantly, falling from 6.8 to 4.7 in Egypt and 6.0 to 4.9 in Tunisia. Thus, a shared effect of the political transition in both countries has been to make Egyptians and Tunisians—though not other Arab publics—question whether democracy is the right system for their country.

Egypt and Tunisia

As we have seen, views regarding democracy changed dramatically in Tunisia in the wake of the Jasmine Revolution. Tunisians became far more concerned about democracy's potential downsides and worried increasingly that, even if generally preferable, it might not be right for their country. Egyptian attitudes toward democracy, by contrast, changed little. Egyptian support for democracy held steady, and Egyptians were no more worried about democracy's possible shortcomings after the uprising than they had been before. Meanwhile, despite the transition, early 2013 found Egyptians to be among the least likely people in the Arab world to say that their country was democratic, or to find democracy suitable for their country. Given that both Egypt and Tunisia experienced free and fair elections won by Islamist parties, what accounts for these differences in public opinion between the two cases? Why did Egyptians keep their confidence in democracy despite losing faith in their country's democratic transition?

The key is that Egyptians blamed problems associated with their country's transition not on democracy itself, but on political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite the overwhelming victory of the Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party and other Islamists in Egypt's 2011–12 parliamentary elections, at the time relatively few Egyptians supported Islamist ideology. In June 2011, only 36 percent agreed or strongly agreed that religious leaders should have influence over government decisions. The experience of having an Islamist government made Egyptians even less ready to back political Islam. In April 2013, the percentage favoring political Islam fell by nearly half to just 19 percent. Trust in the Brotherhood plummeted from 43 to 20 percent between 2011 and 2013.

By contrast, support for political Islam did not decline in Tunisia. Al-

though only one in five Tunisians favored giving religious leaders a say over government decisions in 2011, this percentage held steady during the transition. In 2013, the share of Tunisians agreeing with this statement was 24 percent, suggesting that support for political Islam may even have gone up a bit. Meanwhile, trust in Ennahda, the main Islamist party, also stayed fairly stable, dipping only five points to 35 percent. Taken together, these results imply that the attitudes of Tunisians toward the relationship between religion and politics and the country's main Islam-based movement changed little following the transition.

Differences between the Tunisian and Egyptian transitions likely explain the contrasting effects on public opinion. In Tunisia, Ennahda won only a plurality of National Constituent Assembly seats and formed a weak "troika" government with two secular parties. Although feeble and unsteady, this arrangement fostered an environment of democratic compromise and relative inclusiveness. Rather than blame Ennahda or its ideology for transition-era travails, Tunisians updated their beliefs about the costs and benefits of a democratic system.

In Egypt, Islamists won a commanding majority in parliamentary elections and narrowly won the presidency. In November 2012, President Mohamed Morsi decreed that he would be above the law pending the ratification of a new constitution. Soon thereafter, the Islamist-dominated Constituent Assembly finalized a draft constitution with no support from secular or minority voices. A referendum ratified this document, but many Egyptians still seem to have viewed the whole process as authoritarianism working under a democratic guise. Amid deep polarization, they blamed transitional problems on the actions and ideology of a specific government rather than the procedural system that brought it to power. Thus Egyptians lost faith in political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood as well as in the belief that their system was actually democratic, but they did not revise their views about democracy itself.

A Non-Democratic Non-Wave?

Why did views about democracy shift so little in response to the Arab uprisings and their aftermath? To begin with, most citizens saw the uprisings as being more about better governance and the economy rather than democracy as such. In six of the nine countries, fewer than half of third-wave respondents named a desire for "civil and political freedoms and emancipation from oppression" as one of three major reasons for the protests.

The economy seems to have been particularly important. In every country, more than half of all respondents placed the need for "improving economic conditions" among the trio of main causes of the demonstrations. In Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Tunisia, the figure clustered around 70 percent. As for better governance, in eight of the nine coun-

tries more than half the respondents called anger at “state corruption” one of the three main causes of the “Arab Spring.” The exception was Tunisia, where that figure was a still-impressive 42 percent. Uniquely among those surveyed, a supermajority (66 percent) of Tunisians cited a desire for “dignity” as a key driver of the protests (in no other country did this figure exceed 33 percent).

Whatever the travails and disappointments of the Arab Spring, they have not caused Arab citizenries to sour on the idea of democracy.

The Arab Barometer’s findings call into question the role of diffusion. There is evidence that it helped the uprisings to spread and had an immediate effect on public opinion

about democracy, but the current analysis suggests that this effect rapidly waned.⁹ The Egyptian and Tunisian experiences offered Arab publics new information about the nature of political transitions, yet Arab citizens outside Egypt and Tunisia either did not receive this information or did not use it to update their own beliefs about democracy.

Instead, citizens focused on events closer to home. Tunisians updated their beliefs about democracy, while Egyptians drew distinctly different lessons from their experience. In other countries, citizens did not take their regime’s reforms or promises to increase democratic development seriously. For example, Jordan made a number of constitutional changes in the name of democracy after the Arab uprisings, but the Jordanian public did not update its beliefs about democracy based on these changes. Meanwhile, an autocrat’s fall and talk of a democratic revolution in Yemen failed to produce significant changes in Yemeni public opinion about democracy. Recognizing that a change of leader is not necessarily a change of regime, Yemenis did not update their views in most instances. Thus, at least by this measure, the Arab uprisings have not produced a unified Arab public.

Yet the long-term prospects for democracy in the region have likely benefited from the “non-democratic non-wave” that followed the Arab uprisings. As the so-called Arab Spring has given way to talk of an “Arab Winter,” a loss of popular support for democracy has not been one of the causalities. Because those in the region did not perceive the Arab uprisings through the lens of democracy, and because the effects of diffusion have been limited, citizens have by and large maintained their faith in democracy. This does not mean that democracy is likely to sweep the Arab world anytime soon, but if Tunisia’s democratic experiment succeeds, there might be imitators. The latest findings of the Arab Barometer hold out some hope in this regard, for they suggest that whatever the travails and disappointments of the Arab Spring, they have not caused Arab citizenries to sour on the idea of democracy.

NOTES

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