Contentious Politics in the Maghreb – Dynamics of Contention in Tunisia and Morocco

Johan R. Roko

Abstract

This article draws upon an early study of the spring 2011 unrest in the Arab world to examine and compare how popular mobilization could take place under the repressive conditions of the Tunisian and Moroccan regimes. The analysis is structured around concepts borrowed from Social Movement theory and Political Economy and tests their validity. The study finds that the Social Constructivist approach can best be adapted to understand the events of early 2011. In particular, this article emphasizes how economic pressures had spurred the creation of shared discourses and collective action frames which could be disseminated via Social Media in order to mobilize large groups. However, the role of social media was overstated while the Tunisian revolution and protests in Morocco took place, and this article highlights the continued importance of established forms of collective organization such as the trade unions. This article also looks at variations in how the regimes reacted to the unrest. One conclusion is that the Moroccan regime benefited from its traditional legitimacy and was more flexible in its encounter with protesters than the regime of Ben Ali - These characteristics are strengths which protected the Moroccan monarchy during those tumultuous days.

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Introduction

The upheavals of early 2011 across the Arab world took most analysts by surprise. The massive protests and subsequent regime changes in Tunis, Cairo, Tripoli and Sana’a left observers searching for explanations of how this popular mobilization could take place so suddenly in a region generally known for its resilient authoritarian regimes. In this study, I attempt to answer the fundamental question as to how these regime changes and waves of popular protest could take place and gain the momentum they did, when the authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states of the region kept their oppressive powers until the very end. I have selected Tunisia and Morocco as cases for comparison and contrast, but we shall see that events in both countries seem to contradict prevailing theories on how popular contention and regime changes usually occur.

Numerous studies make it clear that the economic and social conditions in several Arab countries had been on the decline in the decades prior to the 2011 unrest, and that the regimes in these countries had been increasingly unable to address the grievances of their people. I will briefly discuss this history of economic problems and the related political and social changes. This study confirms the direct link between these processes and the popular anger that became visible during those months. Secondly, I will explore the ways in which popular discontent could evolve into mobilization and street action, with a focus on challenging and updating pre-existing perspectives within the field of Social Movement Theory (SMT). One interesting aspect that I discovered during this study was the ways in which the regime’s character and response to the protests would fundamentally affect the outcome – we will examine this dimension last.

Recent developments in the understanding of contentious politics

In order to make sense of the unrest in Tunisia and Morocco, I decided to borrow approaches and concepts from Social Movement Theory. This eclectic body of theory encompasses various perspectives straddling the divides between sociology, psychology, and political science. The leading name within the field today is arguably Sidney Tarrow, and I have used elements of his well-known Political Opportunity Model. Tarrow views mobilization and contention as likely when political opportunity structures and constraints change. Opportunity structures are consistent dimensions of the political struggle external to the protest movement itself, which encourage people to mobilize. Tarrow highlights seven such dimensions in his classic work on the subject, including: 1) Increased political access, mostly by means of elections – 2) deepening divisions among elites, – 3) political realignments strengthening the protest movement – 4) influential elite groups defect to protesters’ camp – and 5) repression is moderate or inconsistent (1998, 77-80). He also brings in the more constant factors of state strength and state repression.

Tarrow admits that the social constructivist paradigm complements his own model of how protest politics emerge. Throughout the history of Social Movement Theory, scholars have been struggling to solve the conceptual challenge about whether it is external causal mechanisms, or purposive agency, that drives contention forward (Tilly 1978, 6). The rise of the term intersubjectivity might offer a solution, according to social constructivists. Intersubjectivity refers to shared meanings which are constructed and renegotiated in interactions among people (Melucci 1995, 45). Doug McAdam (1982, 51) stated that people have to collectively define a situation as unjust before they resort to collective action. This process may generate a collective action frame, an interpretative scheme that makes sense of events and helps guide collective action (Snow 1986).

I suggest that a combination of Tarrow’s opportunity structures and social constructivist concepts is most adequate to examine the uprisings in Tunisia and Morocco,
Authoritarian stagnation and economic decline in the Middle East

It is commonly accepted that Arab countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan, have attempted to reform their economies and state-society relations over the last 20-30 years. Already in the 1970s, Tunisia and Morocco experienced the drawbacks of their previous state-centered economic policies, and Tunisia in fact pioneered elements of the "Infitah” economic opening policy early in the decade. Morocco followed suit with limited reforms in 1977, but became later one of the Arab countries which implemented structural adjustment packages with most determination, from 1983 onwards (Richards and Waterbury 2008, 243, 239).

The adjustment packages these countries signed on, included classical macro-economic measures such as currency devaluations, promoting exports, reducing tariffs and import protectionist measures, deregulating the banking sector, raising real interest rates, privatization, and reducing budget deficits (Beau and Tuquoi 1999, 147). Typically, the IMF and the World Bank wanted governments to have deficits no higher than 4% of GDP (Ibid, 220; Layachi 1998b 58-60). Subsidies were to be removed or reduced to a minimum (Perkins 2004, 170). In comparison to other Middle Eastern countries, both Tunisia and Morocco were seen as very compliant with these demands from the international financial institutions. Both countries also proceeded to increase the rate of private and foreign investment in their economies, and sought free trade agreements with the EU, their main trading partner.

Despite the impression that these two countries were actively liberalizing their economies, many challenges remained. Privatization of major public companies became a drawn-out affair that was rarely transparent, and which created new constellations of power (Alexander 2010, 82-84; Pfeiffer 1999, 24-25). Reducing budget deficits was not achieved by increasing revenue collection, but by cutting public expenditures, employment figures, and subsidies. Reductions in the public sector corresponded with a general economic downturn in the 1980s, which further compounded unemployment and poverty problems. Moreover, the lower – and lower-middle classes – reacted strongly to the cuts in subsidies. For instance, "bread riots" occurred intermittently in Casablanca and other major Moroccan cities, and opened up a space for contentious politics that has existed to this day (Sater 2010, 103)

The authoritarian regimes of Tunisia and Morocco were arguably both corporatist, in the sense that they sought to maintain a degree of control over key sectors of economic life and also subordinate major organized interests such as workers, students, and lawyers into a hierarchic structure where the focus was not on “horizontal” and class solidarity, but on vertical integration according to economic sector, with the state at the head (Eshteshami and Murphy 1996, 755). Morocco never provided as much welfare benefits to its people as Tunisia, so the Moroccan state also played a more limited role in the economy than its Tunisian counterpart. Correspondingly, the Tunisian regime, first under Habib Bourguiba, and later under Ben Ali, demanded stronger loyalty to its economic visions and policies. To a larger extent, Tunisia amounted to a classic example of the “authoritarian bargain”, where the state ensures economic growth and development and a measure of distribution, in return for strong control over society and intolerance towards any form of dissent (Paczynska 2010, 37).

The essential argument here is that deregulation, privatization and decrease in public expenditures undermined this arrangement in authoritarian states across the Middle East. Regime legitimacy, a very complex variable, had in large part been founded on the regime’s own discourse which had underlined the need for national unity and a strong statist involvement in the economy. With the retraction of state welfare programs and subsidies, the authoritarian regimes lost legitimacy in the eyes of their people, and increasingly had to resort
to repressive means to secure power.

Reductions in public expenditures as part of the turn towards neoliberal economic policy only exacerbated income disparities in each country, putting pressure on the emerging middle class, which had benefited most from the corporatist and state-centered economy. While more and more people found themselves unemployed, informally employed, or underemployed, the corruption and opulent lifestyles of the autocrats became at the same time more obvious. This was especially the case in Tunisia, where all the evidence pointed towards the large scale corruption and take-over of state assets by President Ben Ali, his family, and his infamous wife, Leila Trabelsi (Beau and Graciet 2009). Heavy censorship and control over the media entailed that Tunisian outlets could rarely comment on this power abuse and embezzlement, but this is exactly where the emergence of new channels of information became crucial. French journalists published stories (Lamloum and Ravenel 2002, Beau and Tuquoi 1999, Beau and Graciet 2009) comparing the Ben Ali regime to a mafia, and later, American diplomatic cables commenting on the Ben Ali’s aggressive take-over of private Tunisian companies were made public with Wikileaks (Nawaat Online 2010). With the advent of transnational television channels such as Al Jazeera, the Internet, and social media; such information became more widespread and gradually an awareness of the blatant corruption spread among many Tunisians.

In Morocco, corruption was also rampant and there was awareness about it, at least within large segments of the literate and educated strata of the population. However, regime corruption was perceived differently than in Tunisia. In the 1990s, Morocco experienced a gradual opening of its political space which included multiparty elections and appointment of ministers from opposition parties, along with the scaling back of the security state through allowing limited space for debate and criticism in the media and civil society. Within this context, it became common to criticize the government and the courts for bias, inefficiency, mismanagement, and even corruption. However, the real challenge in Morocco was that the cabinet of ministers and Parliament have limited real power, as the supreme authority still lies with King Mohamed VI and his close coterie of advisors, which form part of a wide network known in Morocco as the Makhzen (Boukhars 2011, 51-53; Sater 2010, 83). The idea of the Makhzen has a long history in Moroccan political tradition, and is used today to describe an informal, loosely knit, nation-wide network consisting of the King, his advisors, Army, Police, and Ministry of the Interior officials, regional governors and local leaders as well as private businessmen. This network is tied by clientelism, family and friendship connections, and shared political interests, constituting – according to several observers – the true stem of the Moroccan regime (Layachi 1998, 31).

While the Moroccan ministers might have been targets of criticism for years, the King and his shadowy Makhzen remained elevated above these institutions. The King has even taken advantage of the new governments and Parliament through bypassing them completely and addressing the people directly, reinventing a form of royal populism which has ensured King Mohamed VI’s continued popularity with most segments of the Moroccan population (Boukhars 2011, 36). Foreign observers have repeatedly commented on the Monarchy’s dealing with privatization and the Makhzen’s accrual of colossal wealth, but the regime setup has deflected such criticism towards other state institutions and prevented the Monarchy and Makhzen from becoming a direct target for grievances and perceptions of injustice like the Ben Ali regime.

The Moroccan regime has also handled civil society quite differently from Ben Ali. In

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1 King Mohamed VI’s status is also protected by old-rooted traditions. People consider the King a religious authority, and his person is seen as above criticism.
Tunisia, the regime strove to control and subjugate civil society. Under the pretext of fighting radical Islamism, the government reverted to more and more authoritarian practices in the 1990s, infiltrating human rights organizations, surveilling and arresting activists. The remaining non-governmental organizations (NGOs) critical of the regime, such as the Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de L’Homme (LTDH) were thoroughly marginalized (Sadiki 2002, 69-71, Hibou 2011, 188-189). In Morocco, however, the Monarchy had found more subtle ways to control civil society. The regime acknowledged that human rights violations had taken place, notably under the repression of King Hassan II in the 1970s and 1980s. However, by taking the initiative on human rights reform, the Moroccan regime was also able to control the direction and content of the reforms, and prevent them from becoming a real threat. Furthermore, the Monarch and his government managed to delineate a limited sphere of issues which reformers could address: including women’s, children’s, and minority (Amazigh people) rights along with other social issues that did not challenge the regime’s legitimacy directly (Layachi 1998, 97-98). Moreover, civil society in Morocco was not always intended to be a critical counter-weight to the regime. Oftentimes, NGOs had been set up by groups and individuals who used them more as a vehicle to receive funding, than as an independent voice in society (Sater 2007, 22). Many NGOs, both in Tunisia and Morocco, functioned as an extension of state patronage networks, and the most successful ones were quite depoliticized and focused mainly on charity work.

Specialists focusing on Morocco have generally viewed the Monarchy’s role as that of an arbiter between different social and regime factions – a role the King has usually played very well. Morocco is geographically a large country with numerous regional, rural-urban, ethnic, economic, class, and other social fault lines, and the Monarch has mostly been able to balance different claims and maintain his relationships with these different parts of his Kingdom (Sater 2010, 85-86). In contrast, Ben Ali was often perceived as ruling by means of an isolated, technocratic bureaucracy, which did not provide the same strong and varied channels to receive signals about the current situation in the country and the regime’s popularity. In ways reminding one of the Makhzen, Ben Ali had established his private patronage networks throughout the bureaucracy and security apparatus in order to retain personal control and ensure loyalty in case any challenges would arise (Interviews 2011). However, these networks did not prove strong enough in the face of popular protest in January 2011.

Regime popularity must have decreased sharply around the time of the financial crisis of 2008. This is when we observe the first major riots in Tunisia, in the mining town of Gafsa. These riots were brutally suppressed, but inspired other Tunisians and left the country simmering with discontent. It became clearer to people both in Tunisia and Morocco that a neoliberal economy had not succeeded in providing growth for the many; rather, new wealth had accumulated within the regime and its entourage. Over the same years, the income gap widened and unemployment had long been on the rise. The middle class had been weakened. In 2008, a Tunisian family on average spent 36% of their income on basic foodstuffs, which is a high figure for a country boasting of its solid middle class and advanced levels of development (Schraeder and Derissi 2011, 7-8). Unemployment and a feeling of disenfranchisement were spreading within the populations of both countries, resulting in a high resentment of the unjust and repressive political order. What is intriguing then is how the episode where one man immolated himself in Sidi Bouzid, in the Tunisian countryside, on December 17, 2010, could spark an anger that would shake the Arab political order to its foundations.
Chapter: Popular mobilization under authoritarian rule in Tunisia and Morocco

The protests of 2010-2011 happened very suddenly, and there were few obvious signs that the political opportunity structure had changed markedly in either Tunisia or Morocco. Ben Ali was becoming older, and there were growing concerns about the succession at the palace in Carthage, but nothing pointed towards change in the immediate future. In Morocco, King Mohamed VI had only ruled for little more than a decade, and his regime was managing to deal with contention within the spaces which the regime itself delineated and controlled. There were no signs of increased political access, no new substantial divisions among elites, no major political realignments that opened a space for protest movements, and repression was stable – in Tunisia, the repressive security forces grew constantly under Ben Ali (Sadiki 2002, 68).

With little apparent changes in political opportunity structure, I shift to a more social constructivist approach to understand how mobilization could take place under such stable and unfavorable conditions. Klandermans (1997, 20), a Dutch sociologist and proponent of a constructivist approach, underlines how people who experience grievances seek to confirm their understanding of their own problems within informal networks such family, friends, the neighborhood, the mosque, etc. This interpersonal interaction allows for the creation of a shared discourse on the existing political and socio-economic injustices in the country (Ibid.). Of course, it is almost impossible to gauge the extent of such informal, low-key discursive processes in an authoritarian state, where critical debate is not tolerated and where there is a lack of media to publicize these emerging shared understandings. Furthermore, an atmosphere of resentment does not necessarily lead to actual mobilization and protests: Authoritarian regimes create a political culture of fear or apathy which makes collective action very difficult. Social constructivists conclude that for mobilization to be an option, people's sense of agency has to be awakened (Ibid, 42). To sum up, there are many steps between the emergence of a new shared discourse about injustice, and actual street action. Not only is there need for agency, but people must also realize who the target of their claims is – the easier recognizable the target of protest, the easier it is to mobilize people (Gamson 1995, 90).

In several interviews with activists and analysts of events in Tunisia, and to a lesser extent, Morocco, it becomes clear that one of the strongest driving forces behind the popular anger was the deeply felt and shared sense of humiliation people experience under a non-democratic regime. Especially the large cohorts of youth who were unable to find jobs, who worked in the informal sector, or who saw few prospects for a better future, felt alienated within the neo-liberal, proto-modern economies that Ben Ali and the Moroccan Kings had set up. The special circumstance in the Arab countries was of course that many of these people suffering with unemployment and deteriorating living standards were educated, many having finished many years of higher education. It has been a long-standing challenge of Middle Eastern societies to create enough jobs to absorb the new generations of graduates resulting from the demographic explosion (Boukharis 2011; Richards and Waterbury 2008, 119). Education systems in Tunisia and Morocco did not produce graduates in correspondence with what the new labor markets needed, and in any case economic growth and job creation lagged far behind population growth. Morocco, for instance, needs to create 200,000 jobs a year to absorb new graduates – in 2009, only 95,000 new jobs were registered (Paciello 2010, 93). The result was that both Tunisia and Morocco had hundreds of thousands of people who could not fulfill their aspirations, and who often felt that society did not appreciate or respect them.

The regimes were unable to integrate these large groups back into society, but were mainly concerned with controlling them. Therefore, the police frequently harassed, arrested and searched unemployed youth, youth in street gangs, or people working illegally as street
vendors, and often treated them with great brutality (Hanafi 2011 Online; interviews July 2011). This inhumane treatment only added to the strong feelings of alienation and resent these groups felt towards the state. Ironically, the unemployed, marginalized youth, the informally employed and the impoverished lower-middle class actually made up the majority of people in many neighborhoods or towns, and their shared frustration became an explosive mix which would drive popular anger after the “spark” was lit. Again, it was impossible to assess the importance of this collective frame before street action actually took place. In any case, the frustration and humiliation was enough for one man, Mohammed al Bouazizi, to commit the most extreme act of protest: Suicide by self-immolation.

The Tunisian revolution

On December 17, 2010, the riots in Sidi Bouzid were only local. People in the town clashed with police after the incident leading to Bouazizi’s death, and mobilization spread fast through informal networks. These networks also extended to neighboring communities. When the police responded with great brutality, the ground was set for a massive escalation on both sides. There were two crucial differences between the riots of December 2010, and previous unrest like the one in Gafsa two years earlier. First, the social media had emerged as a new essential resource for mobilization, and second, civil society in Tunisia made a conscientious decision to participate in escalating mobilization countrywide (interviews 2011).

Interestingly, my interviews with activists and NGO members in Tunisia provide two slightly different accounts of how events unfolded after Sidi Bouzid. The young cyber-activists tend to underline how social media became the main platform for spontaneous mobilization. From the first days, video clips, “tweets” and Facebook posts about police brutality spread on the Internet and stirred strong emotions. Tarrow’s (1998, 83) models acknowledge this mechanism of mobilization: Ruthless repression paradoxically facilitates outrage, which might drive protests. With repression and humiliation becoming so palpable, many felt that they had little to lose as individuals; while conversely, the stakes for their communities were becoming higher by the day. Saad, a member of the LTDH, suggested: “The regime was dressed down, exposed as totally tyrannical against its own people. Some of us had known this for a long time...for others; the violence was a wake-up call” (interview 2011). Maha, member of the NGO Conseil National des Libertés Tunisiennes argued similarly: “there was a human sentiment – an emotional aspect (…), and Facebook was a platform for provoking and expressing these feelings” (Interview 2011). Even though participation was dangerous, people descended on the streets in ever growing numbers. People did not make individual, rationally calculated decisions about whether to join or not – they were embedded in social relations and shared a discourse which compelled them to act. Ramzi, a radio journalist with the liberal channel Express FM said that social media allowed for a mise en scène, a horrifying spectacle towards which people could not stay neutral (interview 2011).

The Tunisian Revolution represents a qualitatively new phenomenon because online platforms played a key role for organization and mobilization. Young activists I spoke to in Tunis made it clear that the cyber-movement had not needed an established structure or leadership. Online, coordination and sharing of information became decentralized, horizontal, anonymous, and almost effortless. People demonstrated during the day and shared pictures during the night, but the youth insisted that there had not been a need for a social protest movement in the traditional sense. Facebook and other media allowed the activists to retain their own individuality and to opt in and out of online communities without any social consequences per se. There was no need for the social integration and face-to-face interaction which a traditional protest movement requires (Wanous, Rechers and Malik 1984, 671). Certainly, social media helped lower the threshold of mobilization and
made it possible for people with no previous political experience to become activists overnight. In a matter of weeks, awareness about the regime's brutality spread at an exponential rate, and people went from merely sharing in the opposition discourse to full action mobilization within a matter of days. The fact that more and more people joined enhanced people's sense of agency, and facilitated a self-reinforcing phenomenon culminating in hundreds of thousands of people from all ages, social classes and political views to join a truly decentralized mass movement in Tunis.

When I interviewed activists from Tunisia's civil society, they had a different narrative to share. Especially members of the powerful labor union *Unione Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT) and the Tunisian Bar Association claimed that they had played an important role in organizing and participating in the protests and that those online communities were not enough to sustain mobilization in the face of relentless repression. Cadres of UGTT argued that their offices had helped initiate the first rallies (Interviews, 2011). This was unexpected, because scholars like Hibou (2011) have reiterated that the regime had successfully co-opted the UGTT over the last few years. Local cadres refuted this, and illustrated how the UGTT had functioned as a counter-weight to the regime for many years (see also Perkins 2004). With its massive rank-and-file of 500,000 members and substantial organizational and economic resources, the UGTT turned into a core element of the protest movements. Its members had a strong shared identity and saw demonstrating as a duty, and the labor union was adept at organizing rallies in traditional ways with leaflets, posters and SMS, thus reaching those who were not part of the cyber-activist networks (Interview 2011).

To a lesser extent, the Tunisian Bar Association and the human rights organization LTDH also spearheaded the demonstrations. The lawyers had a strong esprit de corps and a long-standing tradition of critiquing the lack of civil rights and due process in Tunisian courts, and when they went on strike this had a strong symbolic effect (Aljazeera English Online 2011). They were also easily recognizable in the marches with their black robes. All in all, my research revealed that the few NGOs in Tunisia, which could still be characterized as independent, played a much bigger role than I expected in the mobilization. The successful escalation of protests to a nationwide level, and to groups which were not members of NGOs or the trade union, however, relied in large part on the cyber-activists and the youth. The regime had effectively prevented organizations like the LTDH from recruiting new members for many years, and mainstream youth was never formally organized (Ghorbal 2011). The success of mobilization in Tunisia seems to be based on the well-functioning cooperation between these two segments, which materialized despite cultural and generational differences.

In fact, mobilization was so swift and unexpected that nobody was prepared to harness or really lead the spontaneous movement that emerged. NGO members, dissenting intellectuals and politicians jumped onto the opportunity for protests when it came, but they did not have the resources or the time to impose their own agendas on the movement. The Tunisian mass mobilization can be subdivided into three main categories – First, the traditional civil society members, second, the new young cyber-activists and bloggers, and third – the masses, which were inspired and mobilized by the first two. Ultimately, we cannot distinguish totally between these three: Cyber-activism, for instance, blurs the distinction between activists and the masses. I dare conclude that the Tunisian mass mobilization represents a new phenomenon because of the role of online channels, but I want to reiterate that the role of civil society and the UGTT should not be underestimated.

The February 20 Movement and protests in Morocco

In Morocco, the unfolding of events in the spring of 2011 was quite different. First of all, events in Morocco were directly inspired by the revolutions in Tunis and Cairo. The
Arab spring is an excellent example of the transnational diffusion of contentious politics (Tarrow 1998). International media and online sources transmitted images of the successful revolutions to people who had access to them in Morocco, and soon, people started discussing online whether the country could, and should experience something similar.

It is immediately clear that Facebook and online communities played an essential role also in Morocco, providing for a decentralized, inclusive and nationwide dialogue among activists. And as I have shown before, the social and economic problems were arguably even more severe in Morocco than in Tunisia, and there was a sufficiently developed perception of injustice that people rioted with irregular intervals (Paciello 2010, 94). Due to the less oppressive regime, contentious politics and claims-making could be nurtured more openly, but I shall return to why these discourses turned out to be less potent than they were in Tunisia.

Interestingly, interview respondents from different backgrounds in Morocco emphasized different forces which in their view drove mobilization. As in Tunisia, several of the youth, the bloggers and cyber-activists argued consistently that the protest movement had resulted from forums online, first and foremost on Facebook. A small group had taken the initiative by posting a video where they stated what they would want to change in the country, and then let people discuss it. This online manifesto was seemingly enough to unleash a mass movement in the streets (Interview with Selma, youth activist, 2011). The narrative about “spontaneous” mobilization coordinated online is a forceful one, and it reflects a wish not to be associated with pre-existing formal organizations, political parties or sectorial interests. Mobilization was in one way easier in Morocco, because people did not have to fear police violence to the same extent as in Tunisia. Conversely, however, this also meant that protests lacked the emotional impact that images from the clashes in Tunisia had on many Tunisians. As Tarrow (1998, 83) puts it: Ruthless repression paradoxically facilitates outrage, which might drive protests.

My research in Rabat also revealed that well-established NGOs played a crucial role in setting up the February 20 Movement. Interviews with activists revealed that almost all of them had a connection with either Amnesty International Maroc or the Association Marocaine des Droits de l’Homme (AMDH). Especially youth from the latter helped to plan and coordinate protest activities. The first mass rally on February 20, 2011, which the movement was named after, was planned and announced weeks in advance, and AMDH in Rabat encouraged youth groups from the 90 local chapters of the organization to hold local events as well. Amin, a member of the AMDH Rabat, recalled how key activists had formed a coordination cell where people worked day and night together to prepare for the revolt (Interviews 2011). It is obvious here that pre-existing organizational bonds and networks played a decisive role in getting the movement started. Moreover, 99 Moroccan NGOs supporting the February 20 Movement set up their own umbrella organization called the National Council to add political weight and resources to the movement. In contrast to Tunisia, labor union officials admitted that labor unions in Morocco were smaller and had been much more fragmented and co-opted by the Makhzen than the UGTT, so that they could not play the same decisive role (interview with Abdallah, labor union official, 2011).

Evidently, relying on formal civil society to start a new protest movement offered both advantages and drawbacks for the February 20 Movement. The use of traditional methods for mobilization was relatively more important in Morocco than in Tunisia because fewer people have access to the Internet and new social media.
Table I. Percentage of Individuals using the Internet in Tunisia and Morocco 2009-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country / Year</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. Literacy Rates and Gross Enrollment in Tertiary Education in Tunisia and Morocco

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country/Unit</th>
<th>Total Adult Literacy Rate</th>
<th>Youth (15-24) Literacy Rate</th>
<th>Gross Enrollment Ratios</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>96.8</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>77.9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The February 20 Movement definitely benefited from the pre-existing networks organizational resources and commitment of Amnesty and the AMDH. However, the movement expanded into a coalition with many more NGOs taking part, which is where the risk of internal division surfaced. As the demonstrations dragged on throughout the spring of 2011, observers noticed the strained relationship between Islamists on one side and the plethora of small Leftist groups on the other side (Interviews 2011). This fragmentation entailed that the movement could only agree on a lowest common denominator of social and economic demands, and that the political demands lost some of their prominence after the regime offered reforms in response to the protests. Apart from the internecine debates and risk of fragmentation, the Makhzen could play a game of divide-and-rule among the NGOs. Several of the organizations were already perceived as co-opted by the regime or too close to the Makhzen to provide any real resistance. With the Islamists and the Leftists playing a pivotal role for mobilizing many followers, the Makhzen also accused the February 20 Movement of being run by “extremists”. All these issues weakened Moroccan civil society altogether (Boukhar 2011, interviews 2011).

These problems illustrate why many of the young activists preferred to be seen as completely independent. The February 20 Movement benefited from being portrayed as a genuine youth initiative and even the AMDH was careful to underline the autonomy and grass-roots character of the movement. The role of the senior members in the preparations was downplayed. Generational differences were also visible: One senior official of AMDH revealed that he had been surprised by the level of radicalism among the younger generation (Abdallah, interview 2011).

Despite the commitment of many activists, both online, at meetings, and in the streets, the February 20 Movement was never able to attain a critical mass. The first protest took place in 35 cities simultaneously, and was of unprecedented magnitude. However, Abdallah (interview 2011) from AMDH estimated that the largest single rally had never exceeded 80,000 people, and that the total number of protesters averaged 300,000 weekly. He

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supposed that they had to reach the millions for the regime to concede to its demands. It appears as if the mobilization potential in Morocco had been relatively limited from the beginning. Seemingly, the shared frames of injustice and grievances were less suggestive, and less emotionally charged, than the ones that prepared the ground for action mobilization in Tunisia. In Morocco, people mobilized more along class lines, and many lacked a refined understanding of the political aspects of demands (interview with Amin from AMDH, 2011). In Tunisia, the protest movement was more coherent across class and other fault lines. Moreover, I have noted that most Tunisians had a very clear idea about Ben Ali’s personal responsibility for the widespread corruption, which provided protesters with a clear target to address their grievances to. In Morocco, the King and his closest circles were shielded from most allegations of this nature.

The February 20 Movement advanced demands which were much more moderate than the ones that came from the streets of Tunis. Moroccan protesters demanded constitutional reform and improvements in governance and transparency, in addition to their economic and social demands (February 20 Movement Online). By contrast, Tunisians descended on the streets shouting “Ben Ali dégage!” - Theirs was a clear-cut, spectacular demand that stirred people's emotions and shared feeling of “making history”. Their call to restore dignity was also a very evocative response to the feeling of humiliation shared by so many Tunisians. The protesters in fact dubbed the uprising “Révolution de la Dignité”. The radicalism of demands helped fuel the intensity of protests and incited people to join: They had a clear target and a clear demand, and they were many. Their sense of shared identity, their sense of agency, and the emotional impact of sharing the collective frame with others were much more powerful than among their Moroccan counterparts. In social constructivist terms, then, there are considerable variations on key variables which affect the magnitude of mobilization, and the outcome of protests (see Klandermans 1997 and Melucci 1995). However, I stress that the interaction between a protest movement and a regime is dynamic, so the regime’s own properties and response to popular contention over time is an element that needs to be analyzed here. If one makes a comparison in terms of socio-economic grievances only, the mobilization potential in Morocco could have been comparable to that of Tunisia. An official from Transparency Maroc explained that “the social and economic grievances in Morocco are the same as in other Arab countries, but the political regime is different, so the outcome must be different” (Interview 2011). In other words, the reason for why protests have been more modest in Morocco might lie as much with the regime as with society. It is to the political regimes that I now turn.

Interactions between the Tunisian and Moroccan regimes and the protest movements

When the outcome of the wave of protests differed so much between the Moroccan and the Tunisian contexts, it is partly because the speed and intensity of mobilization was lower in Morocco, and partly because the regime there reacted very differently towards the nascent protest movement. In Tunisia, escalation was very swift, and the regime was unable to get ahead of developments. In Morocco, the regime had much more time to respond to the popular demands. The Monarchy and the Makhzen might also have learned from the mistakes that Ben Ali and Mubarak had committed.

Beyond police repression, the Ben Ali regime had no convincing way of dealing politically with the crisis. Mamdouh, a political analyst and head of an NGO, argued that the government, the ruling party, and state institutions had been holed out and sidelined by the private patronage networks that the Ben Ali’s family had established within the state (interview 2011). This entailed that the remaining institutions lacked advisors and ideologists who had the possibility to devise a plan to stem the tide of demands and retake the initiative.
The President’s promise to hold elections and reform the constitution was too little too late – popular demands evolved quickly, and Ben Ali’s speeches to the nation only radicalized the protests even more (Ibid., Miladi 2011). Therefore, mobilization continued unabated. After 100,000 people had gathered in the southern city of Sfax on January 12, Tunisians started realizing that the point of no return had been attained. The momentum then spiraled upwards again, and the regime was overtaken by events. On January 14, the UGTT called a general strike. The country’s leadership was already paralyzed. Ben Ali fled the same afternoon; defeated by a movement his private state apparatus had been unable to foresee (Al Jazeera English Online, 2011).

Tarrow (1998, 81) characterizes centralized states with a high capacity for policy implementation as “strong states”. The Ben Ali’s regime prior to December 17, 2010 appeared relatively strong compared with many other Arab states, with a monolithic, hierarchic power apparatus and well developed, modern administrative – especially coercive – resources. This power structure offered demonstrators a centralized target of protest. I have already noted that Ben Ali’s regime had become more predatory and more isolated from societal pressures: With Hanspeter Kriesi, we can say that Ben Ali’s state was highly exclusionary (1995, 40-44). Ultimately, the state had become so unresponsive to the grievances of Tunisian society that it was unprepared for the crisis. Paradoxically, these regime features amounted to an advantage for protesters (see Tarrow 1998, 82).

Ben Ali’s regime had not grasped how its flawed rule had undermined its own power, and I want to highlight that the popular perception of who is responsible for corruption has emerged as an important factor in this study. As we have seen repeatedly, the regime had, in contrast to the Monarchy in Morocco, been totally inflexible in its encounters with domestic resistance. Ben Ali relied overwhelmingly on force and saw no need to open his political system, not even to preempt challengers like King Mohamed VI. Another key independent variable is emerging here, which I associate closely with regime type: Regime rigidity/adaptability – the regime’s capacity and willingness to compromise with or co-opt challenging forces in order to survive (see Korany 2012).

The interaction of the Moroccan regime with the February 20 Movement provides an intriguing contrast to that of Ben Ali’s. Until the mass protests started to stir up the popular districts in the late spring of 2011, the Moroccan state did not respond with much repression.

Table III: Estimates of Casualties in Tunisia and Morocco 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The King also decided to react politically to street demands. On March 9, he gave a speech where he declared that a constitutional reform would take place, the minimum wage would be increased, and other token social reforms carried out (Abdallah, interview 2011).

Thus, King Mohamed VI regained the initiative in the political process merely a few weeks after the protests had begun. He retained full control of the constitutional reform process, but people responded with enthusiasm, claiming that the King had granted them their “Arab Spring” without violence. This meant that the mass protests lost a lot of their less dedicated followers. The King had successfully appropriated the Movement’s own discourse to preserve his own hegemony. Nadia, coordinator with AMDH, deplored: “When the King says he wants to address poverty, and we also want to address poverty, this creates ambiguity

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among people. Who are they going to believe?” (Interview 2011). One after another, Moroccan NGOs were confronted with the choice to boycott the reforms, or bandwagon with the King’s initiative. Almost all chose the last option.

Mobilization in itself is exhaustive and requires heavy involvement and commitment by participants and organizations. A true popular movement can rarely be sustained over time (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986). In Morocco, the popular perception of injustice was simply not emotionally intense enough to nurture prolonged levels of contention, and the numbers receded through the spring of 2011. Dwindling support arguably affects the perception of agency among less committed participants, and demobilization becomes a self-reinforcing phenomenon.

Analysts commented that the new Constitution that was approved by popular referendum on July 1, 2011 did not safeguard any gains in terms of fundamental civic and political rights from future threats. In general, reforms in Morocco remain precarious, because the Makhzen prefers to rule by means of ambiguity, nepotism, and traditionalism rather than codified laws (Sater 2007; Younes M’Jahid, interview 2011). The new Constitution has achieved little in terms of improving predictability in governance or equality before the law, even though it was met with much optimism from civil society.

The Moroccan regime has succeeded where Ben Ali failed – by creating a counter-discourse to the protest movement, and dividing the Moroccan people accordingly. Interestingly, the more integrative mode of governance in Morocco gave the regime an advantage when dealing with protests. In contrast to Ben Ali’s exclusionary, isolated state, the Moroccan regime was much more adept at engaging with and balancing between diverse social, political and economic interests. King Mohamed’s state is arguably less monolithic and more multi-centered than Ben Ali’s technocracy. The ambiguous governance structures of the Monarchy, the superficially modern institutions of Parliament and courts, and the faceless Makhzen that permeates the entire structure, make for a difficult protest target. Selma, a February 20 Movement activist, reflected on this: “people don’t know to whom, or how, to address their grievances” (Interview 2011). One understands immediately that the “perception of injustice” factor suffered from such a lack of an easily identifiable antagonist: Corruption and mismanagement were systemic and severe, but they were not associated with the Head of State like they had been in Tunisia. This difference also informed people’s notion of agency in each country differently (see Gamson 1995).

This discussion has shown that there were fundamental differences between how the Tunisian and Moroccan regimes interacted with challengers during the spring of 2011, and that this behavior reflects their more long-standing approaches to political opposition. With reference to the regime rigidity/adaptability variable I applied in the case of Tunisia, I conclude that Morocco is situated much more towards the flexible/integrative end of the spectrum and has for a long time, and that this can explain why that country only saw the emergence of a reformist movement with limited goals, which also gained fewer supporters and had a smaller impact on the regime than did contention in Tunisia. This is because the regime had already opened up a regulated arena for political contestation, it had implemented reforms which, albeit limited, had appeased some of civil society’s grievances and marginalized the more revolutionary voices, and the King took the political initiative at an early stage of the spring 2011 cycle of contention.

Lastly, if one looks for Tarrow’s (1998) other political opportunity structures in the

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5Younes M’Jahid of the Moroccan Journalist Union stated in an interview that he perceived that the new Constitution opened for an improved Press Code and more freedom of expression. However, he also conceded that the Makhzen and the regime keep the degree of censorship unpredictable on purpose: The “Red lines” which delimit the issues on which the regime does not tolerate criticism fluctuate with the political climate. This vagueness is precisely a tool for the Makhzen to keep critics disciplined, and it is a good example of how the Moroccan regime uses ambiguity as a means of control (interview 2011).
cases of Morocco, we see that most of them had not, and did not, materialize during the winter and spring of 2011. There were no major political realignments that helped the protest movement. People had gained political access several years before, although elections did not markedly influence the Makhzen’s power. Moroccans felt emboldened by the successes in other Arab countries, and they protested in unprecedented numbers. Yet regardless of how pressured the regime felt, contention could not fracture it. Elites did not defect to the protesters, and the Moroccan regime remained as pluralistic and flexible, yet as loyal to its leader, as it had always been.

Conclusion

This study supports my introductory argument that one needs to apply a social constructivist approach to identify how structural, long-term socio-economic and political changes could help spur sudden collective action. Despite the decline of the authoritarian corporatist order, I have observed that both the Tunisian and Moroccan regimes were quite adept at retaining control of their respective societies, albeit in different ways. Social and economic decline undermined regime legitimacy in the long run, but did not affect the regime’s coercive capacities and ultimate control over their respective societies. I have attempted to provide an overview of the complex interplay between traditional civil society, new online activists, the masses, and the regimes. In particular, the role of civil society seems to have been understated in the run-up to the Tunisian revolution, although a lot of action frames were also disseminated by independent activists and youth who were not affiliated with any organizations but used online platforms to mobilize. In Morocco, the February 20 Movement was more a social protest movement in the traditional sense, relying heavily on NGOs to initiate and maintain support. So even though the case of Tunisia arguably represents a qualitatively new form of protest that is spontaneous, leaderless, and facilitated by social media, I want to highlight the role of NGOs in both cases. Media coverage of the Arab spring tended to overlook this aspect and only talked about the “Facebook revolutions”.

Secondly, this study asserts that the regime’s interaction with protests over time can help explain the outcomes of the waves of protest - why Ben Ali had to flee, while the Moroccan King reasserted his control in a matter of weeks. It is clear that the variable regime flexibility/adaptability is closely related to regime resilience. In the case of Tunisia, the regime was not prepared for the crisis, and reacted only with repression. Attempts at negotiating with the protest movement came too late. Moreover, Ben Ali was the very visible leader of a regime that most people perceived as corrupt and decaying. In Morocco, the regime was also seen as corrupt, but the King deflected criticism towards elected officials. Mohamed VI manages to control the country by means of a discrete, yet omnipresent patronage network known as the Makhzen. The Moroccan regime has dealt with contention before and opened up certain spaces for political contestation and criticism – in fact, Morocco can be considered a semi-authoritarian state. In a move typical of the regime, the King took control over the reform process in the country, in a move which appeased a lot of the critics, but did not really yield substantive gains in terms of improved governance, democracy, or reduced corruption. In short, we see that the Moroccan regime has managed to adapt itself to emerging pressures, co-opting them while rarely ceding real power to independent entities (Boukhrs 2011).

Finally, differences in the level of education and distribution across social class also shaped the speed and intensity of mobilization. Tunisia’s educated middle class was much larger than the one in Morocco, and its discourse of humiliation and marginalization more radical. Against most predictions, this group spearheaded a movement that rose up in a sudden wave and overturned an authoritarian regime that had seemed strong and stable up to
its very last days. Now, I have argued that due to its flexibility and capacity to integrate new political demands, the regime in Morocco appears more shielded from the threat of revolution. However, it is always the unpredictable factor of human agency which unleashes mass protests, sometimes against the predictions of social scientists. Hence, no authoritarian regime can consider itself completely safe from the power of contentious politics.

Table IV: Overview of Structural and Discursive Variables for Tunisia and Morocco

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable / Country</th>
<th>Tunisia</th>
<th>Morocco</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic liberalization</td>
<td>Highly liberalized</td>
<td>Liberalized, but national economy less modernized and integrated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political liberalization</td>
<td>Not liberalized</td>
<td>Limited reforms implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy and education levels</td>
<td>High levels of literacy and education</td>
<td>Relatively low for the region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil society strength</td>
<td>Weak, but strong monopoly trade union</td>
<td>Few constraints on activity but relatively small and fragmented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regime type/adaptability</td>
<td>Authoritarian and unwilling to reform</td>
<td>Semi-authoritarian, demonstrating adaptability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular perception on corruption</td>
<td>Corruption seen as emanating from ruling family</td>
<td>Corruption seen as endemic but not associated with Head of State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception on legitimacy/injustice</td>
<td>Regime perceived as highly illegitimate</td>
<td>Regime legitimacy in slow decline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent of consensus mobilization</td>
<td>Widespread consensus</td>
<td>Consensus on grievances divided along class and education lines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of agency</td>
<td>Widely shared and increasing notion of agency</td>
<td>Relatively strong in February 2011 but declining since then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speed of mobilization</td>
<td>Very rapid, spontaneous</td>
<td>Gradual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnitude of contention</td>
<td>Very large</td>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radicalism of protesters’ demands</td>
<td>Revolutionary – demanding regime change</td>
<td>Reformist – political and social demands but not regime change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This article is an abridged version of my Master's Thesis Contentious Politics in the Maghreb: A Comparative Study of Mobilization in Tunisia and Morocco (2011), submitted to the American University in Cairo. Please refer to the thesis for an extended discussion and bibliography.
Bibliography


