Trajectories and Junctures in the Arab Regimes' Responses to the Arab uprisings

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For so long, scholars of the Arab politics have been preoccupied with the resilience of the authoritarian regimes. Much effort has been done to explain stability of Arab regimes and it was commonly assumed political change in the near future was largely unlikely. Authoritarian regimes in the Arab world were described as "strong", "solid" and "stable". They were recognized as "persistent", "durable" and "enduring". They seemed to be "robust" and "resilient". Some political scientists, almost in despair, used the word "formidable" and "stubborn".

There appeared to be innumerable number of factors that sustained the stability of the Arab regimes: the fragmented and mutually quarreling opposition parties; weak civil society; skillful tactics of the ruling regimes to divide and rule the opposition employing wide ranging measures from oppression and co-optation; the firm grip that those regimes had over the massive and multifaceted military and security apparatus; the economic rent pouring in to the oil-producing countries that made it possible to govern without much care about accountability; the existence of the outside powers the United States on top of them who had interests in sustaining autocrats to maintain order in the strategically important

region; the ability of the regimes to exploit existing regional and sectarian conflicts to claim and justify the need for a police state, effectively stultifying dissent — the list goes on.

Arab uprising in 2011 posed a huge challenge for political scientists of the Arab world as well as for rulers of the each country. Sudden rise of protests from outside the conventional circle of opposition caught the regimes off guard and shook some of them on the brink of collapse. Some regimes collapsed. Others did not.

Students of political researches of the Arab world now have the huge task of explaining why some Arab regimes collapsed while others did not, and why some countries were able to make transitions relatively smoothly from the old regime to the establishment of a new political order while others precipitated into civil war and chaos.

This paper looks back the varying courses of events in each Arab country most hard-hit by the Arab uprisings and it will be attempted to compare varying state responses and outcomes. Factors supposed to have influenced the difference are to be explored. Much attention will be paid with civil-military relations and historical background of state formation and its influences on the composition of military in each country are considered. It will also discuss the impact of international politics at the regional and global level on these reactions and consequences.

Regime responses and outcomes in the face of protests
How did the regimes change in the Arab countries that saw large-scale protests? In this paper, six hardest-hit countries are discussed: Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria and Bahrain.

In Tunisia and Egypt, regimes facing large-scale protests gave up power quickly, and the process moved on to the transition to a new regime relatively smoothly. The presidents and many of their close associates were either arrested or fled their countries, and faced criminal prosecution. The other four regimes adamantly refused to relinquish power in the face of protests and often used brute force, such as deploying the military, in response. In Yemen, when antigovernment protests swelled beginning in late January 2011, President Ali Abdullah Saleh repeatedly refused to stand down and prolonged the conflict, including small-scale armed clashes, until he finally signed an agreement in November and ceded power to the vice president. The large-scale, armed crackdown on March 18 produced a fissure in the unity within the regime, and major figures of the regime such as General Ali Mohsen, who hails from the same region and tribe as the president, abandoned the regime. As a moderate case of civil warfare broke out involving localized fighting between pro-Saleh forces and the anti-Saleh forces, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states led by Saudi Arabia, which feared a growing conflict, attempted to calm the conflict by engineering a peaceful step-down for Saleh, leading to an agreement for a coordinated transition with amnesty for the outgoing president.

In Libya, the regime cracked down on protests with tanks, mortars, attack helicopters and fighter planes. Large-scale defections began early on, with schismatic tendencies rooted in the history between Tripolitania to the west, which includes the capital Tripoli, and Cyrenaica to the east, where Benghazi is located. This led to the breakup of Libya's military and administrative institutions, and large-scale civil war broke out. As NATO forces intervened, Tripoli fell in August and Sirte in October, when Muammar Gaddafi was killed.

In Syria, the military and security forces joined with the Shabbiha, the militia employed by the government, to crack down on anti-government protests with excessive force. This led to the gradual militarization of the protests, and a nationwide, protracted civil war where a deadlock currently prevails. In Bahrain, demonstrations spread involving more than half of its citizens, against which the monarchy requested military intervention by the GCC member countries. As Saudi Arabian and UAE troops marched in and applied pressure, Bahraini security troops used force to dispel the demonstrators. Protests continue even now around Manama in a state of deadlock. Harsh suppression continues, as the United States, Japan, and the rest of the international community turn a blind eye because of their interest in the stability of the oil-rich Gulf region and the stability of the regime in Bahrain as a key element in their strategy against Iran.

Trajectories & Critical Junctures in Regime Collapse/Persistence

What led to the different outcomes for these regimes? This section will introduce concepts for analyzing the trajectory of the political developments in each of these countries. Three critical junctures in the political situation of each of the countries that faced large-scale anti-government demonstrations will be identified with a specific focus on the response from the regime and in particular the decisions and the actions that the military took.

The first juncture is the point where the protests demanding the ousting of the regime reaches a critical mass and the regime must decide whether to use force or resign. The response of the military is crucial here. It boils down to a simple but critical question: "Would the military shoot its own citizens?" This is the "moment of truth" for the relationship between the regime and the military. In an authoritarian regime, the supreme leader normally has firm control over the military and security apparatus. The regime and the military are deemed to be one and inseparable, and the expectation that the military and security apparatus

would join hands to crack down whenever an anti-government movement appeared served to reinforce the stability and sustainability of the regime.

However, when they actually faced strong social pressure, the military in Tunisia and Egypt refused to participate in the armed crackdown, delivering the coup de grâce to the respective regimes. In the other four countries, the military to various degrees joined other internal security apparatus in the crackdown, leading to bloodshed.

In other words, the first juncture appears to have been whether the unity between the regime and the military could be maintained or not. The Tunisian and Egyptian military disobeyed orders at the institutional level, leading to the separation of the regime and the military, while the Yemeni, Libyan, Syrian and Bahraini military as institutions followed demands to crack down on demonstrators.

The second juncture, which came after the relationship between the regime and the military had made this fateful choice, was whether or not unity within the military would be maintained. This issue is deeply related to paramilitary forces such as elite guards, special forces, security forces and militia, as how the relationships between the military and other security apparatus that have been established in parallel evolve is one element that determines the direction of future events. To put it another way, this was a matter that concerned the internal unity of the military and security apparatus. Among the four countries where unity between the military and the regime was maintained in the face of large-scale demonstrations, Yemen and Libya saw the early onset of defections in the military and security apparatus at the command, regional and tribal levels. This precipitated the breakup of the military and other government institutions, leading to a state of civil war/conflict, making it difficult for the regime to

maintain military control. By contrast, in Syria and Bahrain, institutional unity has been maintained after the military and security apparatus joined the crackdown. In Syria, some officers and soldiers joined the Free Syrian Army, but they were "deserters" acting as individuals, and it appears that defection at the command level is rare. Thus, the regime in Syria and Bahrain are able to confront the anti-government forces in a civil war/conflict situation from a militarily superior vantage point.

In Egypt and Tunisia the transition process is proceeding in a relatively stable manner largely due to the fact that the institutional unity of the military has been maintained throughout the process. This is so despite the fact that the military accelerated and determined the demise of the previous regime by distancing itself from it.

It goes without saying, of course, that it was not these internal structural factors alone that determined the outcome. What is worth mentioning is foreign intervention, in particular military intervention or lack thereof, and its form. The third juncture comes at this moment. In Libya, there was a high possibility that the anti-government forces would have been stamped out by the end of March at least for the time being if NATO forces had not conducted aerial bombing at the time. Although antigovernment demonstrations would have survived without the bombing, the conflict would have dragged on for a long time. At the other end in Bahrain, the military intervention by the GCC member countries and acquiescence by the Western nations including Japan had a decisive effect on the immediate development of events (continuation of the incumbent regime). In Syria, Middle East players (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Iran, various forces in Lebanon, etc.), players outside the region (the US, France, Russia, China, etc.) and nongovernment forces in and outside the region (Al-Qaeda, and other Islamist militia) are engaging through a wide range of interventions and support. The

international politics around these interventions has become a major problem in itself and has actually increased the complexity and opacity of the shape and form of domestic enmity and confrontations.
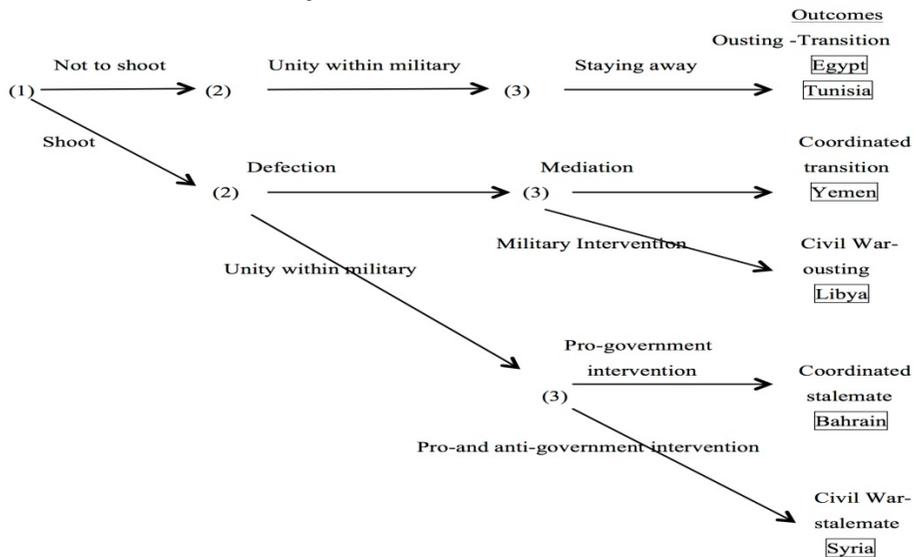
National Military or Regime Military

What were the factors that determined the decisions of the respective regimes and military at each of the critical junctures? Three elements proved to be important at each of the three junctures. The first was the degree of institutionalization/patrimonialization of the military; the second was the composition of military, namely whether it was a tribal alliance or was singularly dominated by a specific social group mainly coalescing in line with sectarian affiliations to religious sect; and the third was foreign intervention (or lack thereof) and its form. The Chart incorporates these three elements and illustrates the timelines and junctures for these six countries.

CHART: Trajectories of Arab Spring countries: critical junctures and their causes
Critical Juncture (1) – division *between* regime and military: "Shoot or not to shoot"
Critical Juncture (2) – division *within* military: "Defection or only deserters"
Critical Juncture (3) – modes of foreign intervention

At the first juncture, the point where the military "shoots or does not shoot" at the protesters following the regime's orders, the key factor is the degree of institutionalization of the military and security apparatus. This is strongly influenced by whether the military and security apparatus are patrimonially constituted or not. Syria's President Bashar al-Assad was initially not considered as the successor to his predecessor and father Hafez al-Assad. He was educated as an ophthalmologist and was receiving training in London. However, when his older brother Basil, the presumed successor, died in an accident in 1994, he was quickly called back from London and named successor. He rose quickly in the military ranks, reaching lieutenant general. When the control of the military is at its core a family business, it can be called a patrimonially constituted military.

This contrasts with Egypt, where Gamal Mubarak, the second son of President Hosni Mubarak, has been groomed to be the successor since the turn of the century but was not given recognition as a military officer. Instead, Gamal rose quickly as an executive member of the National Democratic Party, the dominant political party in power. There was plenty of corruption and nepotism in the Egyptian state apparatus, but they do not appear to have reached that deeply into the military.

As the institutionalization of the military as an organization of the modern state advances, officers and soldiers are recruited from all regions and stratum of the country regardless of sects, tribes or kinship ties, promotion is based on merit, and there is no patrimonial control of the military by family members of the president, such a military can then claim to have the true features of a "national military". By contrast, when the military is arbitrarily controlled by the family members, other relatives and cronies of the supreme leader, and its commands are constituted and controlled by sectarian, tribal, regional, and/or patronage links, such a military has the features of a "regime military". From this perspective, it is clear that the Tunisian and Egyptian militaries clearly have the features of a

"national military" while the militaries and security apparatus in the other four countries show obvious characteristics of a "regime military".

As a regime faces large-scale dissent from society at large and teeters on the brink of collapse, a "regime military" shoots citizens while a "national military" does not. As the six countries were placed in more or less the same situation, this point was clearly demonstrated as if it were a controlled experiment in political science.

Unity/Division within Military

The second juncture, whether or not unity within the military and security apparatus would be maintained, depends much on whether the composition of the military is founded on an alliance based on tribal, sectarian, regional and other social divisions or on more or less singular rule by a specific tribe or sectarian group on which the core of the regime is based.

Yemen had been under patrimonial domination based on the alliance network centers around the Saleh clan. The children and brothers of the President Saleh dominated major positions in the military, General Ali Mohsen and other leaders of Saleh's fellow Sanhan tribesmen formed an alliance with them in controlling the main military commands, and leaders of the powerful Hashid tribal confederacy, to which the Sanhan tribe belonged, held major assignments such as the command of regional military districts. Since these military commands were constituted at the tribal level and the regime was supported by an intricate framework of alliances between the leaders of these tribes, the loosening of the alliance network led to the collapse of the regime. It also shows the challenge ahead for political transition in post-Saleh Yemen. If the new regime is constituted by a new set of tribal alliances, the nature of the new regime in Yemen will not be very different from that of the Saleh era.

By contrast, in Syria, the Alawites, who comprise only about 10% of the population, hold an overwhelming majority of the key positions in the military and the Baath Party security apparatus and exercise control, supported by some Sunnis and minority Christians and the like. Thus, they have been able to avert defections at the command level and worked to sustain their regime. However, since this generates enmity between the majority of Syrians and the sectarian supporters of the Assad regime, the short-term maintenance of the regime may lead to the collapse of the state and sectarian civil war in the long run.

Foreign Interventions and their Forms

The circumstances of foreign intervention, which comprise the next juncture, differ significantly from country to country. One important point here is that the effect of foreign intervention may not necessarily depend on the scale of the military pressure but most likely be related to the amount of leverage that the foreign countries have within the respective countries and regimes.

For example, the US did not openly request the Egyptian military to break away from the regime or threaten military intervention. However, the Egyptian military is sustained by US military support, and it must have assumed that it would be difficult to maintain its relationship with the US if it took action that was seriously at odds with American values. Moreover, the Egyptian military must have generated America-like professionalism through the cooperative relationship with the US military that had been built up since the Camp David Agreement in 1978. When US support wavered, that became the final, fatal blow to the continuation of the Mubarak regime.

By contrast, against a country like Syria, which has continuously been subjected to a variety of US sanctions and does not rely on US aid, the leverage of new sanctions is likely to be limited.   The US is not the only source of foreign

intervention, as other major powers such as Russia as well regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran also intervene.

Mutual influence and intervention among countries that are undergoing political change in the Arab Spring may also be important factors, although sufficient attention is not given in this paper. Egypt, where regime change is proceeding ahead of the other five, is now recovering its influence as a major player in regional politics. Its influence on the politics and the society of other Arab countries as well as its interaction with them should not be ignored.

In Tunisia and Egypt, regimes facing large-scale protests gave up power quickly, and the process moved on to the transition to a new regime relatively smoothly. The presidents and many of their close associates were either arrested or fled their countries, and faced criminal prosecution. The other four regimes adamantly refused to relinquish power in the face of protests and often used brute force, such as deploying the military, in response. In Yemen, when antigovernment protests swelled beginning in late January of 2011, President Ali Abdullah Saleh repeatedly refused to stand down and prolonged the conflict, including small-scale armed clashes, until he finally signed an agreement in November and ceded power to the vice president. The large-scale, armed crackdown on March 18 produced a fissure in the unity within the regime, and major figures of the regime such as General Ali Mohsen, who hails from the same region and tribe as the president, abandoned the regime. As a moderate case of civil warfare broke out involving localized fighting between pro-Saleh forces and the anti-Saleh forces, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states led by Saudi Arabia, which feared a growing conflict, attempted to calm the conflict by engineering a peaceful step-down for Saleh, leading to an agreement for a coordinated transition with amnesty for the outgoing president.

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In Syria, the military and security forces joined with the Shabbiha, the militia employed by the government, to crack down on anti-government protests with excessive force. This led to the gradual militarization of the protests, and a nationwide, protracted civil war where a deadlock currently prevails. The failure to reach a consensus for an international intervention was the obvious factor which contributed to the present stalemate.

In Bahrain, demonstrations spread involving more than half of its citizens, against which the monarchy requested military intervention by the GCC member countries. As Saudi Arabian and UAE troops drove in to help Bahraini security forces to stifle demonstrations. Harsh suppression continues, as the United States, Japan, and the rest of the international community turn a blind eye because of their interest in the stability of the oil-rich Gulf region and the stability of the regime in Bahrain as a key element in their strategy against Iran.