CONSTRUCTING AN OPEN MODEL OF TRANSITION:

THE CASE OF NORTH AFRICA

By Francesco Cavatorta
Dept. of Politics
University College Dublin
Dublin, Republic of Ireland
E-mail: Francesco.Cavatorta@ucd.ie

<u>Abstract</u>

This paper puts forth an open model of transition to democracy challenging the conventional wisdom of the literature on processes of democratisation, which focuses almost exclusively on domestic factors. International variables are thus at the centre of explanations for regime change. The article argues that transitions do not occur in a vacuum and presents a theoretical model that can be useful to analyse external-internal linkages. The model is then applied to three North African countries, whose efforts to democratise have failed: Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria. The study concludes that it is no longer methodologically sound to exclude international factors from the analysis of transitions and that there is considerable evidence pointing in the direction of the central role they have.

Introduction

The literature on transitions to democracy has recently come under criticism for its shortcomings, particularly when it comes to deal with the issue of how the process of democratisation itself plays out.[1] While criticism is to be welcomed, as it enriches and stimulates the academic debate, it should be highlighted that "transitology" has made a significant contribution to the understanding of regime change by identifying the actors involved and the patterns or sequences of stages in the transition. With this in mind, the objective of this study is to offer a different, and hopefully improved, model of the process of democratisation that would attempt to deal with the issue of external linkages and the problem of the end-result. In short, the paper attempts to look at transitional processes by linking strategies and decision-making of internal actors to the international environment and to international actors with their autonomous strategies and goals. Furthermore, it hopes to establish that international factors have a decisive effect on the failure or success of countries in their effort to fully democratise.

The literature has indeed begun to analyse in more detail the international context of regime change[2] and this paper hopes to make a small contribution to this literature through the examination of the relationship between internal actors and external pressures in the failed processes of democratisation in North Africa.

The evident failure in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia to democratise the political system has come to prominence again because of the façade elections and referendums that recently took place in these countries. Fifteen years after a promising liberalisation, hopes of real change have been shattered and "Maghreb democracy makes even sub-Saharan Africa look good."[3]

---

[1] Thomas Carothers, "The end of the transition paradigm", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2002.
[2] Jeffrey Haynes, "Comparative Politics and Globalisation", *European Political Science*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Summer 2003, pp. 17-26..
[3] "Maghreb Democracy Makes even sub-Saharan Africa look good", *Wall Street Journal of Europe*, June 4, 2002.

The open model

Both the literature on comparative politics and international relations attempted to deal with the problem of the level of analysis in order to understand political phenomena and explain significant political changes.[4] However, one of the most prominent events in the 'political' life of a country, namely regime change, has only been explored through the relationship of external-internal linkages in a very limited way. The common perception or intuition when it comes to deal with regime change is that it is an overwhelmingly domestic process. One of the main conclusions of the study on transitions conducted by Schmitter and O'Donnell was that democratisations were overwhelmingly internal processes and that international factors had, at best, a secondary role.[5] Internal actors and domestic decision-making are therefore analysed in great detail to explain how and why liberalisation comes about and how and why it then progresses to democratisation or fails to lead to the full opening up of the political system. The whole process is examined usually through the framework of the rational actor model. The attention is on the costs of repression/costs of toleration from the point of view of the regime, on the strength and strategies of the opposition, and on how the two play against each other as well as on how the two different camps may be split between soft-liners and hard-liners.

The international dimension of this process, while not entirely neglected, has been certainly marginalised within the scholarship on transition. Geoffrey Pridham, a leading scholar in the field, admitted that the international context was "the forgotten dimension"[6] of transition studies and that this research area should be explored further. More recently, there have been attempts to come to terms with this question and in his analysis of transitions in Eastern Europe, Sakwa argues that "democratisation in the region is to a large degree a function of international processes and is far from being solely an endogenous process."[7] It is also worth mentioning that a few scholars attempted to factor

---

[4] Peter Evans, Harold Jacobson and Robert Putnam (eds.), Double-Edged Diplomacy. International Bargaining and Domestic Politics, London: University of California Press, 1993.
[5] Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, Transitions from Authoritarian Rule. Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.
[6] Geoffrey Pridham, "Democratic Transition and the international environment', in Geoffrey Pridham (ed.) Transitions to Democracy, Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1995, p. 445.
[7] Richard Sakwa, "Introduction. The Democratic Experience" in Richard Sakwa (ed.) The Experience of Democratisation in Eastern Europe, London: Macmillan Press, 1999, p. 3.

in these international factors in a systematic and theoretical manner. In particular, Laurence Whitehead and Geoffrey Pridham used, respectively, the notions of 'democratisation through convergence'[8] and 'system penetration'[9] to link the external environment to internal developments in countries going through the process of liberalisation and democratisation.

While extremely helpful, these notions fail to assign international variables a more central role in the processes of democratisation. The changes in Eastern Europe and Central America in terms of the collapse of authoritarian regimes seem to owe much to international factors, namely the Soviet Union's withdrawal from its imperial claims or the collapse of the socialist ideology accompanied by the victory of the capitalist system, but few attempts have been made to systematise how internal actors react to the international environment. The model of this paper incorporates international variables and links them to internal actors' strategies and decision-making processes. Before outlining how the model is supposed to work, four points need to be clarified regarding the assumptions accepted in the model.

The first point is concerned with the very concepts of democracy and democratisation themselves. In the literature of transitions to democracy, the concept of democracy is far from being the 'essentially contested concept' that it is in political philosophy. The definition that is generally upheld is the one associated with the procedural democracy as defined for instance by Samuel Huntington or by Schmitter and Karl.[10] It follows that a process of democratisation taking place in any given country refers to a very specific path that countries are obliged to walk and refers to a very specific point of arrival that should be reached: western liberal democracy. The use of the definitions of democracy and democratisation as being unproblematic is obviously welcome from an analytical point of view, but it already underlines the biased language

[8] Laurence Whitehead, "Democracy by Convergence and Southern Europe: a Comparative Politics Perspective" in Geoffrey Pridham (ed.) <u>Encouraging Democracy. The International Context of Regime Transition in Southern Europe</u>, Leicester and London: Leicester University Press, 1991.

[9] Geoffrey Pridahm, "International Influences and Democratic Transition: Problems of Theory and Practice in Linkage Politics" in Geoffrey Pridham (ed.) <u>Encouraging Democracy. The International Context of Regime Transition in Southern Europe</u>, Leicester and London: Leicester University Press, 1991.

[10] Philippe Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, "What Democracy Is...and Is Not", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 2, 1991, pp. 75-88.

used in so far as the definitions clearly draw on the Western experience. The relevance of the international context is already evident in the language used to analyse the phenomenon of regime change itself. A transition to democracy is such if it conforms to Western expectations and Western standards. Domestic actors are aware of this and it can be argued that many of their actions and strategies would be geared towards satisfying this 'acceptance' criterion. Failure or success is measured through international standards.

A second important point has to do with the claim that when analysing transitions we are dealing with periods of high volatility and uncertainty. This point can be easily accepted and factored in the model. Schmitter and O'Donnell argue convincingly that during the transitional period "actors are likely to undergo significant changes as they try to respond to the changing contexts presented them by liberalisation and democratisation."[11] If this is correct, it can be argued that actors react not only to changes in their surrounding environment, but to the perceptions of changes as well; strategies are constantly modified to maximise benefits and great unpredictability surrounds the whole process. This point is largely consistent with the contention that these reactions are not limited to perceived or real domestic-level changes, but also to external events, shocks or policy changes by international actors.

A third point that emerges from the literature and that can be accepted in the model is the assertion that only domestic actors are the ones formally in charge of the process from its initiation to its conclusion, be it a successful transition or a return to some sort of authoritarianism or the establishment of a semi-democracy. The opening up of the system is indeed usually decided and executed following divisions and negotiations within the ruling elite over which course of action should be followed to fend off a regime-threatening crisis. The ruling elites are also formally in charge of negotiating, secretly or openly, with the opposition. The 'whole game' is indeed played at domestic level, but this does not exclude that decisions are made, strategies drawn up and actions taken under the influence and the constraints that develop at international level.

A fourth assumption that is not disputed is that domestic actors have different levels of power (military, economic, social), preferred outcomes and strategies on how to

---

[11] O'Donnell and Schmitter, Transitions from Authoritarian Rule, p. 4.

achieve their goals. However, these do not remain fixed throughout the process and international factors can profoundly affect the distribution of such power, change the preferred outcome and modify the strategies to achieve it.

Following the work of Hakan Yilmaz, the model of democratic change attempts to "account for the roles played by international factors in shaping strategic calculations and policy preferences of the government and opposition actors in their struggles to prevent or promote democratic reforms."[12] However, the model, unlike Yilmaz's, draws from the larger literature of International Political Economy and assumes that the so-called external democracy promotion environment is not the all-encompassing environment within which actors play, but simply a sub-environment of a more complex and less 'welcoming' international system. Thus, the promotion of democracy becomes an instrument of foreign policy to achieve results and not an end in itself. This allows for processes of democratisation to fail due to the lack of support for a democratising process that may threaten not only the privileges and the position of the ruling elites, but also the interests of a range of external actors. Moreover, the model would apply to a range of countries and not only to the so-called semi-peripheral states of the capitalist system.

Following and modifying the analysis by George Segal on the relationship between international relations and democratic transitions,[13] two dimensions should be taken into account to determine the extent of the impact of the international context. The first dimension is the extent to which the country is integrated in the international economic system and which position it occupies. The level of economic development of a country has been used to analyse at which point in time a country under an authoritarian regime was ready to break with it and undertake regime change, but it is equally important to stress that the initiation of liberalisation may be due to external forces that pressurise the country to conform to an internationally-validated economic system if it is to extract benefits from the international system. The level of integration into the economic system makes a country more or less prone to be 'penetrated' by outside forces

---

[12] Hakan Yilmaz, "External-Internal Linkages in Democratization: Developing an Open Model of Democratic Change", *Democrtization*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Summer 2002, p. 67.
[13] George Segal, "International Relations and Democratic Transition", in Geoffrey Pridham (ed.) Encouraging Democracy. The International Context of Regime Transition in Southern Europe, Leicester and London: Leicester University Press, 1991.

and renders it more or less susceptible to changes taking place in the external environment as a whole or to policy changes occurring within a specific international actor. The model assumes that countries that are highly anchored to a single international market (i.e. oil, coffee) will be much more sensitive to changes taking place within that market, as it affects the entire domestic economy and the distributive policies of the government. Single-product export countries are therefore subjected to the fluctuations of the market, over which they have little control.

The second dimension along which we should determine the extent of the impact of international variables on domestic actors is the position of the country in the international system in terms of its geopolitical environment. An analysis of the geopolitical surroundings of the country in transition is one of the keys to understand how external actors may be involved, directly or indirectly, in the calculations and strategies of domestic actors. This is not simply limited to what Yilmaz describes as "the expected external costs of suppression and toleration in a democracy-promotion environment,"[14] but involves many levels such as ideology, culture, and perceived threats/benefits from the transition for a range of actors. Different actors in any given region may be affected by changes taking place in a neighbouring country and this leads to a formulation of policies and actions that aim at impacting on the type of changes taking place.

If the process of transition is to include these two factors, it should also be detailed how the whole process would work. Keeping in mind the assumptions previously described, it is possible to have a tentative typology of the specific variables at play.[15] The first one is 'external shocks' intended as fortuitous and casual events that take place at international level and that influence the domestic actors and 'force' them to re-evaluate where they stand and what they stand for. Such external shocks should be beyond the control of the country under scrutiny and can be seen as triggers of choices and strategies that would have not been undertaken without their occurrence; they may take place within the international economy or within the larger international system as a whole. When

---

[14] Hakan Yilmaz, "External-Internal Linkages", p. 67.

[15] A similar methodology has been previously used to analyse the international context of the Algeria's failed transition. See Francesco Cavatorta, "The Failed Liberalisation of Algeria and the International Context: A Legacy of Stable Authoritarianism", *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 4, Winter 2002, pp. 23-43.

analysing a specific country, one of the first tasks to be accomplished would be try to identify such external shocks.

The second variable is 'direct active policies' by outside actors that have an interest in the country and, specifically, an interest in the regime and policies that the country adopts. These external actors are not simply other states attempting to influence the initiation, the development or the outcome of a transition in a neighbouring country for their own geo-strategic or ideological interests, but it should include a multiplicity of actors. For this reason, international political economy offers valuable insights as it assigns power and interests to numerous types of actors on the international scene ranging from multinationals to international organisations.

The third variable is the 'larger trends' in the international system constraining the timing and the development of political changes. It is of great relevance here the point about the issue of democracy being only a liberal western style democracy. The spirit of time influences the initiation of a democratising process and the end product of such effort. Moreover, the role of western countries is constantly underplayed, even though they have considerable power in shaping international affairs thanks to a combination of economic and military might, domination of international organisations, political influence, and monopoly on so called cultural and social values.[16] Countries embracing democracy and its institutions have thus to conform to a preconceived form of democratic structure based on the experience and the needs of Western liberal-democracies. Furthermore, these countries have to take into consideration their prospects of integration in the international economic system with all the constraints that derive from it.

It is quite difficult to clearly separate these variables, but distinction can be made and we can look at these factors as concentric circles of pressure. Larger trends are long-term and remain reasonably constant and therefore difficult to avoid in the longer term. However this does not mean that the fate of a transition is predetermined by these trends, as external shocks can lead the country in a different direction. When it comes to specific policies by external actors, they tend to converge, in the longer term, with the larger trends in the international system, as they are the product of the very same type of

pressures. More powerful actors would have more leverage and in the short term they might make decisions and implement strategies that seem at odds with the larger trends, but in the longer term they are always reconciled.

These factors all affect the perceptions, strategies, decisions, distribution of power and influence of the domestic actors formally in charge and formally sovereign. These external factors might be more effective at certain points in time during the transition, for instance during the period of consolidation rather than initial liberalisation, but they could be construed as having a pervasive impact throughout the whole process. This model is influenced by the work of Douglas Chalmers on so called 'internationalised domestic politics', which was formulated to "account for the impact of the international factors on the cases of authoritarian breakdown and democratic transition in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s"[17] and expands on it in so far as it deals not only with international actors becoming 'domestically involved', but with domestic actors making rational decisions in light of the changing international environment.

If the model is to work, there is the need to establish some sort of causality between the factors selected and the outcomes. The model has been 'applied' to the three North African countries that began their difficult transition towards the end of the 1980s and that are now 'back to square one', namely authoritarian politics. From the preliminary evidence, it clearly emerges that establishing a significant causal link is extremely complicated. However, it also emerges that the main thrust of the argument seems to be correct, as transitions to democracy do not occur in a political vacuum and that the separation between the national and the international is increasingly restrictive from an analytical point of view. International factors cannot be simply be indicated as facilitating factors when a transition succeeds as it has been done to explain the transitions of Southern European countries nor it cannot be seen to have no impact in the case of a spectacular failure. The external-internal linkages are present at many different levels of interaction and they should be taken into account.

---

[16] This point has been made in Francesco Cavatorta, "Geopolitical Challenges to the Success of Democracy in North Africa: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco", *Democratization*, Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 175-194.
[17] Hakan Yilmaz, "External-Internal Linkages", p. 70.

Following the general typology outlined in the previous pages, the external shocks at play in North Africa include: a) the massive decrease in the price of oil and gas on international markets in 1985/1986 accompanied by the drastic changes in the value of the US dollar; b) the victory of the Afghan guerrilla in their war of liberation against the Soviet Army; and c) the enormous impact of the Gulf War in Arab countries. Among the principal active policies by outside forces, we find: a) the active promotion of democracy by the United States and the European Union (both as an international body and in terms of its composing units); b) the active promotion of Islam as a tool for political struggle with the aim of achieving political power sponsored by the rich Gulf states, Saudi Arabia and Iran; c) the fear of political groups with connections to political Islam and therefore the policies undertaken to try to limit their influence on the part of the major Western democracies; d) the actions by multinational organisations aimed at defending or increasing their privileges in the domestic economic structure of the countries under scrutiny; e) the policies implemented to sere the interests of the international financial institutions. Finally, among the larger trends to be examined are the worldwide move to embracing liberal-democracy, the end of socialism as a viable option for development and the effects of the end of the Cold War.

All these variables do not necessarily act at the same time nor have the same degree of intensity or duration. Some of them are in clear conflict with others, some mutually reinforce each other, but they all have an influence on the domestic actors, who, in turn, have objectives and preferred outcomes of their own. In the end, the process of democratisation will lead to a result that is acceptable to the stronger external forces, be they systemic or individual, and to a set of domestic actors that guarantees the very stability of the international system.

At this point, it also useful to note that domestic actors themselves attempt to influence the international environment in order to elicit reactions/actions that may be useful to the pursuit of their domestic goals. The flow of the pressure is therefore not unidirectional. This is particularly the case when domestic actors feed international actors information and 'data' that are simply intended to advance their position and increase their power vis a vis the domestic opposition. This is a very relevant aspect of the

transitional process and the model should integrate it, but it remains to be seen how much change is provoked internationally by these actions. Nevertheless, it is an aspect that should be researched further.

Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia

Paradoxically, the current authoritarianism displayed in the political regimes of the three North African countries does not reflect the promising democratising steps of the late 1980s and early 1990s. In fact, more or less at the same time when world attention focused on the changes taking place in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, North Africa was already experimenting with political and economic liberalisation. While the timing, development and conclusion of the different processes of democratisation vary across the three countries, there are nevertheless a number of similarities that allow for some comparability. All countries are former French colonies, they interact in a similar geo-political environment, they had experienced authoritarian rule by figures that had gained legitimacy in the struggle for independence and they share the same religion. The international variables impacted on the three countries in a similar fashion, although to different degrees and with different instruments.

Towards the end of the 1980s, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco were in a state of turmoil due to increasing economic and political difficulties. These difficulties were largely due to the poor management of the economy, but they were compounded by the lack of opportunities to manifest political discontent. The late 1980s were therefore characterised by a number of so-called 'bread-riots'.[18] In fact these riots had as much to do with increases in prices for basic food and services as they had with a call for political reforms to open up the political system. However, the manifestation of popular discontent that was ultimately to be the trigger of political liberalisation as the only viable alternative for the regime to remain in power was not rooted entirely in the domestic sphere. Pressures to open up the economy to global market forces and to adapt to the new international economic order were becoming stronger and their adoption provoked internal social and economic instability.

The initiation of the liberalisation process in Algeria is usually seen as the response of the regime to the 1988 October riots, while the prudent Moroccan political openings in 1990 are associated with the effects of the brutal repression of the bread riots in the same year. Tunisia did not experience the same scale of rebellion and repression, but similar problems plagued the new regime of Ben Ali, who had come to power in late 1987 after a bloodless coup. The common response to the turmoil facing the three countries was political liberalisation. Algeria put an end to single-party rule, the Moroccan King allowed for opposition parties to be slowly brought within the system (the policy of *alternance* was fully implemented in 1998) and Ben Ali personally brokered and sponsored a pact among all Tunisian political parties to uphold democratic principles and transform Tunisia's system into a pluralist, liberal democracy. Both the upheavals and the response cannot be fully accounted for without taking into consideration the impact of the external environment. While it is true that the mismanagement of the economy, the demographic explosion and the disaffection of the vast majority of the population, particularly the numerous youth, towards their leaders were all destabilising factors, the external environment compounded them.

By using the typology of the model, it emerges that there are important external-internal connections that 'triggered' liberalisation. Among the larger trends at work at the time in the international system, we find the discrediting of socialism, both politically and more importantly economically, the failure of nationalist models of development, the Western victory in terms of political and economic models on offer, and the beginning of fast-paced economic globalisation. Accompanying the larger trends there was the external shock of 1985/1986, which saw the collapse of oil and gas prices as well as the changes in the value of the dollar. At the same time, international financial institutions were putting pressure on all three North African countries to liberalise their markets and undertake profound structural reforms. The combined effect of all these external pressures resulted in a sudden decrease in the standards of living and, consequently, in the breaking out of violence to protest at the situation.

---

[18] For a detailed study on the impact and implications of such riots, see John Walton and David Seddon <u>Free Markets and Food Riots. The Politics of Global Adjustment</u>, Oxford, Blackwell Press, 1994.

In Algeria, the collapse of the prices of oil and gas, which the country relied on to sustain its inefficient internal market and generous welfare state, meant that revenues went from 13.5 million US dollars in 1985 to only 9.6 million US dollars in 1987.[19] The sharp drop in prices exposed the structural weaknesses of the Algeria economic system and undermined the market-oriented reforms undertaken the previous years. These IMF-sponsored reforms had been draw up within the Algeria government in collaboration with IMF officials.[20] The pressure to conform to a new international economic system, where there was no more room for protectionist/socialist alternatives, reached Algeria by the late 1980s and when the country seemed to be headed towards collapse, the only viable option for the ruling elites was to open up the political system. The initial liberalisation, moreover, was going to please Western countries and large private economic actors such as the oil multinationals. The early effects of the market-oriented reforms exacerbated the social and economic problems of the masses, transforming discontent into organised protest. On the political front, the socialist ideology was discredited worldwide given the enormous failings of the socialist bloc recognised by Gorbachev himself. Algeria had followed the Soviet model of industrial development, financed by the revenues from oil, and at the end of the 1980s found itself somewhat stranded ideologically and economically almost bankrupt. The paradox of this policy is that despite being 'soviet' in its implementation, it was financed through the sale of oil and gas on the market place, which meant that Algeria was integrated in the global capitalist market with all the consequences that this entailed.

The collapse of the Soviet Empire at the end of 1989 was interpreted by the Algeria ruling elites as the decisive victory not only for capitalism, but also for Western liberal democracies as such and their values. Emphasis on human rights, formal democratic procedures and free market economics would be now universal values. In this rapidly changing environment, where Western countries were both victorious and

---

[19] Ismail Khennas and Mustapha Mekideche, "Les hydrocarbures en Algérie: politiques internes et rapport avec le marché mondial" in Martine Verlet (ed.) <u>Coopérer avec l'Algérie: convergences et solidarités</u>, Paris, Publisud, 1995.

[20] For a detailed outlook on IMF-sponsored reforms in the region in the late 1980s, see Yves Gazzo, "Les economies arabes face à la crise", *Maghreb-Machrek*, No. 120, Avril-Juin 1988, pp. 58-67; Jean-Pierre

confident of their superiority, the ruling elites of Algeria had to adapt their domestic political and economic institutions in order to retain their privileges and benefit from the changes that had taken place. The decision to liberalise was not unanimous within the elites, but opposition to it was very weak and, importantly, had the support of the generals, the real wielders of power in the country. As part of the strategy of courting the winning West, Algeria improved its relations with France and, more importantly, with the United States.

While the Algerian elites were the ones that had to go the farthest in terms of reinventing a role and a purpose for themselves due to their ideological proximity to the Soviet Union, the same external pressures weighed on Tunisian and Moroccan decision-makers. Morocco had been a 'loyal' ally of the West during the Cold War and King Hassan played a mayor role as a privileged interlocutor for the West in the Arab world. However, the end of the Cold War and the new environment of democracy-promotion meant that the King had to begin reforming his regime. In the New World Order, Western liberal democracies would be less and less inclined to support authoritarian and overly protectionist regimes as they had done in the past. Following from that, the King began to empty the prisons of its 'political' inmates and accelerated the pace of market-oriented reforms by subscribing to the package offered by the IMF and the World Bank, active in the country since 1983.[21]

Much of the same was at work in Tunisia, where the new leadership attempted to win favours in the West by adopting both political pluralism and market-oriented reforms. Ben Ali played the role of the general unwillingly coming to power in order to save the country and then ride off into the sunset once his mission had been accomplished. The dismantling of the old economic order originated from the poor domestic performances of the economy, but responded as well to the needs of global capitalism, particularly European capital, to expand to peripheral countries. Tunisia, although to a lesser degree than Algeria, has significant reserves of gas and phosphates

---

Sereni, 'L'Algérie, le FMI et le FIS", *Les Cahiers de l'Orient*, No. 25-26, Prémier et Deuxième Trimestre 1992; and Abderrahim Lamchichi, Le Maghreb face à l'Islamisme, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1997.
[21] On the scale of economic reforms, see Tom Najem, "Privatisation and the State in Morocco: Nominal Objectives and Problematic Realities", Mediterranean Politics, Vol. 6, No. 2, Summer 2001, pp. 51-67.

that represent a major attraction for large multinationals in the sector. Furthermore, European firms were trying to find cheap labour and lower taxes. The Tunisian tax-free areas guaranteed both and the Tunisian economy superficially benefited from it.

Thus, the initiation of liberalisation by the ruling elites does not simply depend on the objectives and constraints found at the domestic level, but it is also shaped in conjunction with the international environment.

To an admittedly lesser degree, international forces had influenced the actions, strategies and objectives of the opposition forces. There are two categories of opposition movements that should be discussed. The first type of movements can be labelled the 'traditional opposition', largely secular and with leftist leanings. For the majority of their existence, the traditional opposition forces had been banned from political participation and from simple activism. Their members had been often jailed, exiled or persecuted. The second type of opposition is a more recent phenomenon and can be labelled the 'Islamic opposition' led by relatively obscure scholars. International factors largely determined their successes and their failures in terms of recruitment and political message, while having a considerable impact on their perceptions and strategies vis a vis the regime.

The traditional opposition in all the three Maghreb countries had been formed intellectually in France and believed that the opening up the regime would favour their social-democratic project, which was also largely secular and somewhat elitist. The leaders had enjoyed considerable prestige abroad and among intellectual circles within their country of origins, but the intellectual framework and the solutions they offered were being discredited across the globe and did not take into account the changes of the 1980s in terms of expansion of political Islam. These traditional parties and leaders discovered quite quickly that their influence among the public was extremely limited, as they were identified with the failure of both nationalism, particularly in Morocco, and socialism, particularly in Algeria. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the failure of socialism on a global scale as an alternative economic system, and the lack of intellectual instruments through which they would help people to cope with the sweeping changes brought about by the pressure of international capitalism greatly undermined their discourse and provoked an almost unanimous realignment on the regime's political

positions. It did not help that they were identified with the political and intellectual elites of the former colonial power, which, on its part, had provided them with logistical support, airtime, and consulting on the strategies they should follow in the new open systems they were acting in.

The Islamic opposition found itself instead as the main interlocutor of the regimes, although their strength varied across the three countries. They had benefited in the previous years from generous financial aid from the Saudi government and the other Gulf states, had the wind of the Iranian revolution behind them, and did not subscribe to discredited political theories. Far from claiming an international Islamic conspiracy behind their success and their popularity, it is nevertheless important to highlight that the ideological expansion of politicised Islam across the Muslim world and their political gains made these movements confident that they would be able to obtain power. The openings of the regimes allowed them to freely 'market their product' and the product was well liked. The fact that the main opposition was of 'Islamic' inspiration is partly due to the appeal of such an encompassing ideology at international level. In particular, the success of the Iranian Revolution (only about 10 years old at the time) in ridding the country of a despotic regime and the victory of the Afghan guerrilla in the war against the Soviets seemed to show that Islam, as a set of beliefs and practices, was the way forward to improve collapsing societies.[22]

The are many internal causes that can account for the failure of traditional parties and for the success of Islamic movements such as the charismatic leadership of Madani, Gannouchi and Yassine in respectively Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco or the heavy involvement of these Islamic movements in providing social services, but the international connection is indispensable if any explanation is not to occur in a vacuum. Without this connection, it would be difficult to explain how Islamic movements, with similar views, came to prominence in North Africa at the same time.

The democratisation processes gathered pace also because Western countries welcomed and encouraged them. At the turn of the 1980s, euphoria about democracy had invested Western foreign policies and Islamic parties had yet to be all seen as potential

enemies. For instance, the Islamic Front in Algeria was not yet considered a threat in France and the United States, traditionally close to a number of radical Islamic movements, were not opposed to see these parties participate in the new multiparty systems. The Islamic movement in Tunisia had accepted the pact offered by Ben Ali and promised they would play by the 'democratic' rules set out in the pact[23]. The FIS in Algeria seemed to accept the democratic game as well. Moroccan Islamic movements were weaker, but still "caused considerable anxiety in the immediate aftermath of the Iranian revolution."[24]

The Gulf War and the shock waves it sent through the Arab world upset the balance of power between the opposition and the governments and profoundly modified the transitional game. It is beyond the scope of the paper to discuss in great detail the effects of the Gulf War in the countries under examination, but there are important elements that had a considerable influence on the perceptions and strategies of the actors involved. In Algeria, the Gulf War "considerably inflamed the passions within which Algeria politics took place"[25] and it was the shock that began to destabilise the equilibrium and peaceful co-existence that had been reached between the FIS and the regime. Both Remy Leveau and Severine Labat point out that the Gulf War unsettled the informal and unofficial pact of non-aggression between the FIS and the presidency and undermined the possibility of a smooth transition by radicalising both sides. On the one hand, the FIS saw the spontaneous and popular support for Saddam as the evidence that Algerians were vastly in favour of an Islamic society and that ordinary Algerians were also deeply at odds with Western actions and values. This encouraged the leadership to abandon their previous prudent stances (and disavow their Saudi sponsors and financiers) and to radicalise not only their discourse, but their actions as well. The Gulf War 'shortened' the timeframe of the FIS leadership in terms of when they would be getting to

---

[22] For a detailed study on the expansion of political Islam during the 1980s, see Gilles Kepel, <u>Jihad. Ascesa e Declino</u>, Roma: Carrocci, 2001.

[23] For details of the Tunisian pact, see Lisa Anderson, "Political Pacts, Liberalism and Democracy: the Tunisian National Pact of 1988", *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Spring 1991.

[24] Harry Munson Jr., "Morocco's Fundamentalists", *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 26, No. 3, Summer 1991.

[25] Robert Mortimer, "Islam and Multiparty politics in Algeria", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 4, autumn 1991.

power, as they were now making more radical demands to the regime. Calls for immediate presidential elections, implementation of the *shari'a* and end to the export of oil and gas to countries involved in the aggression against Iraq showed the confidence of the Islamic opposition.

On the other hand, the government found itself at odds with the vast majority of the population, as it attempted to balance its position between the West and the domestic audience. In fact the government was caught between the need to be seen by the West as a reliable partner and the need to be seen as voicing the worries of the majority of the population. This dilemma was not solved and the "Gulf crisis revealed the cruel delegitimisation of the Chadli government, ended the political apathy of the population of the government foreign policy aimed at reinserting Algeria in the international system."[26] The ruling elites realised that they were completely cut off from the popular mood and the less compromising sections began to have the upper hand. Survival at all costs instead of compromise seemed to be the new strategy. Thus, the Gulf War radicalised both actors.

In Tunisia and Morocco, the Gulf War provoked radicalisation and polarisation as well. Contrary to what had been agreed with the pact of 1988, Ben Ali refused to grant the MTI (*Mouvement de Tendance Islmique*) legal status of political party and forced its leader into exile. In the 1989 elections, Islamic candidates, running as independents given that they could not formally run as MTI candidates, polled very well despite electoral frauds by the regime and there was the fear that legalisation of the party during the Gulf crisis or in its aftermath would further strengthen the MTI, whose leader had supported Saddam's intervention in Kuwait. Large crowds of Tunisians had also taken the streets in support of Saddam and Ben Ali attempted to play the same game as its Algerian counterparts. He was more successful because the Islamic movement was less well organised and because he enjoyed widespread legitimacy for having ousted Bourguiba a few months earlier. The general trend however is that "one of the geo-strategic

---

[26] Remy Leveau, "Des Crises à la Guerre" in Remy Leveau (ed.) L'Algérie dans la guerre, Bruxelles: editions Complexe, 1995, pp. 20-21.

consequences of the Gulf War...is the anti-Western radicalisation of fundamentalist movements, which up to then could simply be considered as conservative forces."[27]

The Gulf War and the reactions it provoked in the Arab world began to be a concern in the West. The French government, always sceptical about Islamic movements and their democratic commitment, was finally convinced that these parties should not be allowed into power, as they would pose a threat to French interests. The Gulf War changed American perceptions as well and changes in policies soon followed. The Gulf War showed to the United States that the anti-western hostility displayed in North African streets might be translated into anti-US policies if Islamic movements were to come to power, while the current North African leaders had proved to be 'neutral' if not supportive during the campaign. At this point of the transitional game, the promotion of democracy, while formally remaining at the forefront of the international agenda, ceases to be a priority for key Western countries and this change affected the distribution of power domestically. North African ruling elites found that the costs of repression, even in the face of a clear cut electoral defeat such as the one in Algeria in December 1991, dramatically decreased, as the international environment was favourable to a crackdown on Islamic militants. The opposition movements in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia began to be perceived as serious threats both by the ruling elites of these countries and by international actors, thereby driving down the costs of repression. The ruling elites could guarantee Western actors that they would implement the necessary reforms to insert their countries in the 'proper' position within the international economy and that they would not challenge the international status quo. The repression in Tunisia became quite harsh, the pace of democratic reforms in Morocco slowed down and Algeria plunged into a civil war following the cancellation of the legislative elections of December 1991. The Algerian events had dramatic consequences for the neighbouring countries. Ben Ali decided to renege on the pact signed in 1988 and tightened the grip against the Islamic opposition and effectively wiped out the whole opposition movement creating a police-state that survives today. In Morocco, the King did not take such a hard-line, because the Islamic threat was less important, but the democratic reforms were emptied of any

[27] Olivier Roy, "Les Mouvements Islamistes à l'Epreuve de la Guerre du Golfe", *Revue du Monde*

meaning and real power still lays with the Royal Palace. The Moroccan Islamic movement, on its part, decided not to pursue its objectives in the political arena, for fear of triggering an Algerian scenario and decided to concentrate on providing social services to the masses of impoverished Moroccans.

Western states were not the only actors and sources of influence external to the transitions. A prominent role has been played by international organisations that are formally independent actors. The main actor in the region has been the International Monetary Fund, whose actions had a profound impact on the transition. Not only they contributed to opening up the political systems by forcing the three countries into the larger international economy, but by insisting on neo-liberal reforms they considerably affected how domestic players used the effects of these reforms to gain advantages over one another. If the initiation of the political liberalisation is partially due to the need of the ruling elites to contain the anger and discontent of the masses due to the initial effects of the liberal reforms, its development and its ultimate failure are also partially due to the interference of this institution in the economic life of these two countries. Despite the fact that the devastating social effects of the reforms on the well being of the population, particularly in Morocco and Algeria, were increasingly playing in the hands of the more radical elements of the Islamic movement, the IMF insisted that these policies be continued and even accelerated. The ruling elites gladly went along, as the creation of crony capitalism would massively favour them, and enriched themselves enormously. The prospect of losing some of their privileges through a fair 'democratic' solution that would inevitably entail a redistribution of resources made them even less willing to compromise.

Furthermore, liberal reforms also meant that trading and investment opportunities for large multinationals would be created. Given that all the three countries have considerable energy resources, a certain amount of stability and security was required. The regime in place, whose many members are connected with the very lucrative oil, gas and general import-export sectors could provide both. These connections are quite important in that large economic actors are able to have access to key-decision makers and let their preferences be known. The protection enjoyed by the oil and gas

infrastructure during the ten years civil long war in Algeria is at least suspicious just as it is the massive investments in tax-free zones in Morocco and Tunisia.

By the early 1990s, Tunisia and Algeria had returned to authoritarianism, while Morocco's hopes for achieving real political pluralism have yet to be fulfilled despite the coming to power of King Mohammed IV. The three processes of democratisation failed to consolidate and the links between external variables and domestic actors help explaining the initiation, development and conclusion of the transitional game.

Conclusion

Many other explanations have been advanced for the failure of North Africa to transit to democracy. Some have argued that the failure is due to 'cultural factors', whereby Islamic culture per se and democracy are inherently incompatible.[28] Thus, the process of democratisation was bound to fail because Islam as a set of principles and beliefs is incapable of dealing with the requirements of democracy. It follows that secularisation should precede democratisation.

Others pointed out that, far from having implemented true liberal economic reforms, the three countries did not really experience a liberal revolution. Given that the free-market oriented reforms failed, a true liberal middle-class did not emerge to put pressure on the regime to follow on with democratisation. Others again focused their attention on the conflict of interests and objectives between the ruling elites and the opposition movements. The vital interests of the most powerful domestic actor in the country (be the Army in Algeria, the King in Morocco and the Presidency with entourage and allies in the security forces in Tunisia) would have been threatened by going forward and they reverted back to authoritarianism thereby collapsing the process. The compromises that the ruling elites would have had to endure were not really worth it and suppression seemed to be the only alternative.[29]

---

[28] Edward Shirley, "Is Iran's Present Algeria's Future", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 3, May-June 1995; Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage", *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 266, 1990.

[29] For instance, in the case of Algeria, Mohand Salah Tahi argued that the Army intervendd to break the democratic constitution simply to defend its own interests and privileges, Mohand Salah Tahi, "Algeria's democratisation process: a frustrated hope", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1995; see also Yahia

While there might be an element of truth in all these explanations given that mono-causal explanations do not usually stand up, the paper hopes to have at least offered an explanation where international variables play a decisive role. These international factors should not obviously obscure the role and interests of internal actors, nor the cultural context of the transition nor the inability of a society to transform itself at a point in history when changes are not ripe, but it seems that analysing the international environment may offer insights on the process of democratisation.

The external/internal linkages in political processes have been a matter of debate for some time and this paper aims at contributing to debate by highlighting the relevance of external elements during the most important process in the political life of a country: regime change. The outside world, in the form of systemic pressures, direct policy actions and shocks, impacts on how domestic actors think, act and implement their strategies. It also influences domestic culture by offering other models and analytical frameworks. Transitions do not occur in a vacuum indeed.

Zoubir, "Stalled Democratization of an Authoritarian Regime: the Case of Algeria", *Democratization*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Summer 1995.