Democratization and Civil Society: Libya, Tunisia and the Arab Spring

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Abstract—**There was great hope that the Arab Spring in 2011 would usher in an era of democratic change throughout the Arab world. However, this outcome is unlikely, and the most likely scenario is that the Arab world will continue to be governed by authoritarian governments. This paper attempts to illustrate that democracy in the Middle East is dependent on a strong civil society as a precondition to democratization. This is made evident through a comparative analysis of Libya and Tunisia; The former state transition being a failure because of a lack of any civil society, and the latter being a success as a result of a robust civil society, which existed before the revolution in 2011. The paper builds upon the literature in this area in an attempt to contribute a study based on sound methods and an organized theoretical framework of analysis.**

Index Terms—**Authoritarian regime; civil society; democratization; state transitions.**

I. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As the Arab world began to experience a series of democratic transitions in 2011, experts, analysts, and academics all failed to predict these extraordinary events. The likelihood of anyone predicting the outcomes is an even further stretch. There has since been a resurgence of interest in theories of democratization, and the potential application to the latest wave of democracy occurring throughout the Middle East. To better understand the bleak realities of what is presumed to be these revolutionary failures and a likely return to authoritarian governments; it is best to look comparatively at the literature to understand why a sweeping democratic transition across the Middle East is highly unlikely.

This paper attempts to address the recent wave of democratization that has swept across the Arab world in a comparative context. The focus of this paper is to analyze possible sources of instability in the region and discuss whether the political and security situation in the region become worse. Specifically, this paper looks comparatively at two states currently experiencing democratic transitions; Libya and Tunisia. This comparison contrasts the two states, based on a theoretical framework of strong state and weak state transitions and the role of civil society in democratization in order to draw some general conclusions and explore possible causal factors that result in the success or failure of a democratic transition. The case selection for this paper was chosen to create a clear dichotomy for assessment and discussion. The paper attempts to contribute

to the relevant literature by illustrating that a robust civil society is a necessary precondition for a successful democratic transition. Thus, Libya is likely to fail at achieving any level of democracy, whereas Tunisia is a likely success.

This paper addresses the literature surrounding the failures of democratization and sets out the theoretical framework this paper adopts in order to conduct a comparative method of analysis. The paper uses this theoretical framework and specific comparative method to compare the cases of Libya and Tunisia in order to facilitate discussion and draw some general conclusions. This paper also attempts to set the general parameters of a more in depth study that can potentially be conducted using primary research and other methods beyond the scope of this paper

When looking to analyze transitions of autocratic regimes to democracies, the literature identifies situations and root causes as to why most transitions to democracy fail. Earlier literature draws the connection between elections and democratization. That is electoral success automatically equates with democracy [1]. This of course has since been challenged by scholars who argue that elections more often than not do not result in truly democratic governments [2], [3]. A recent study reveals that since 1991 very few democratic transitions have resulted in actual democracy [4].

The current revolutions taking place across the Arab world is the dominant focus of international relations scholars today. The Arab world is charting a revolutionary path through an era of unfamiliar democratization, and there is no way to predict the outcome until it is over. As political scientists the nature of our research is much better at analyzing outcomes and attempting to create generalizations than it is at predicting outcomes of events like the Arab revolutions. Ironically, even with the vast literature available no one was able to predict the Arab revolutions that are now sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa, toppling corrupt and oppressive regimes that have ruled for decades in many cases.

II. CIVIL SOCIETY

Like many terms in political science, civil society[1] has many different definitions and interpretations spanning across time. Early thinkers began to develop a working definition of civil society. Hobbes and Locke see the state originates in civil society. Montesquieu and Tocqueville conclude that civil society exists partially in opposition to the

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[1] See Cohen, Jean and Andrew Arato. 1994. *Civil society and political theory.* Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press for an in depth analysis of civil society.

state, a sort of check to state power. Gramsci and other Marxists place civil society outside the power structures of the state [5]. This historical context helps to provide some context to proceed with.

While the list of literature debating the finer points of defining civil society can go on for volumes, it is best to define the term in a way that is consistent with the scope of this paper. Civil society can be defined "as the realm of spontaneously created social structures separate from the state that underlie democratic political institutions [6]. Or "Reduced to its elemental meaning, 'civil society' refers to the zone of voluntary associative life beyond family and clan affiliations but separate from the state and the market" [7].

The central debate in the civil society literature is essentially whether civil society develops before or after the actual process of a democratic transition [8]. There are those who argue that civil society develops after a transition [9], [10], [11]. "For most democratic theorists, who tend to see democratization processes and outcomes as contingent on the confluence of international and domestic actors and developments…a democratic civil society develops after the actual process of transition from an authoritarian to a democratic state has taken place" [8].

There have been others, [12] however, arguing mostly from sociological and cultural perspectives, who maintain that civil society frequently develops before, and is in fact a main cause of, the transition to a democratic system. In either case, both camps agree that civil society is one of-if not the-crucial phenomena that takes shape and becomes influential during processes of democratic transition" [8]. This paper argues that civil society is a necessary precondition to democratization. In the Libyan case, there were absolutely no rudiments of a civil society. If there were, the operated so far underground because of the oppressive state that they are virtually nonexistent. Tunisian however, had a strong civil society.

Comparatively we have seen democratization in Latin America was largely successful due to the robust civil society that was present prior to democratic revolutions. Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay all possessed strong civil society organizations that helped weak, authoritarian rulers fall. "Ironically, it would be the experience of the repression of military authoritarian regimes, particularly bureaucratic-authoritarian that would finally produce a fully developed and autonomous civil society, making it an important agent of democratization by contributing to the erosion of authoritarian rule" [8]. As noted above Libya has had no experience with civil society, and needs to develop one in the wake of the revolutions in order to have a chance at a successful democratization process. Regardless of whether civil society develops before or after a revolution, it still remains the primary variable for a successful democratic transition.

Civil society in the Arab world consists of many different divisions; Reference [7] identifies five types of Civil Society Organization's. Islamic CSO's who propagate Islam, spreading the faith through Islamic organizations. These Islamic organizations at the far margins carry a potential risk of becoming radical and clandestine movements. Another type of CSO are service NGO's. Based on western models

these organizations provide services like loans and job training. A third type is professional membership organizations. These include trade unions and professional syndicates. There are also solidarity CSO's, and most importantly prodemocracy organizations [7], [13].[2]

This section of the paper on CSO's adopts a definition and a theoretical framework from a few scholars in the field. Civil society organizations are defined here as "self-organizing and self-regulating groups with corporate identities that are autonomous from the state may exist within any given social or political setting" [8]. Reference [8] goes on to further expand on the definition of civil society organizations. They argue that for civil society organizations to become agents of democratization, the organizations must embody three characteristics.

First, the organizations themselves must operate democratically; they must embody democratic values of diversity and tolerance within its membership.[3] Second, their agendas must contain some element of demand for political democracy, putting increased pressure on the state to make a lasting transition. Third, CSO's need to gain enough individual or collective power to play an influential role in the democratization process, in essence, they must work with the state yet remain autonomous from it [8].

What can civil society do to help develop democracy? Civil society needs to promote political participation, yet it must attempt to limit and control the power of government, and expose any corruption and abuse of power. There is a need to develop a sense of democratic values and to promote civic education in order to have responsible political figures in the future. Finally, being able to inform the public regarding specific issues is essential as well [14]. State oppression of CSO's is one significant reason for the failure. Most governments simply outlaw civil activity, or at least impose restrictions on their operation [15], [7]. Moreover, political culture in the Arab world is not welcoming for civil society. Civic participation in the Arab world is very low. People are generally not as engaged with CSO's in the Arab world like in other regions.

The development of a civil society in Libya is so far behind that a successful democratic transition is next to impossible. Women's participation and combating the social exclusion of women is the first obstacle of Libyan civil society. Traditional obstacles to women need to be abolished so women can become leaders within society. The need to have women as elected officials of government is critical. Many CSO's are even calling for quotas in the assemblies. For this to be successful, education for women regarding their rights and new roles in society is necessary. This is an entire demographic that was largely ignored politically and socially for decades that now needs to be actively engaged in civil society.

Youth education is the second obstacle. The youth population in Libya is very active and at the forefront of the civil society movement toward democracy. As noted above, the CSO's that have developed and continued to operate are

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[2] See Yom (2005) for supplemental information about the various categories of CSO's. Both Yom (2005) and Hawthorne (2004) provide similar categories of Arab World CSO's.
[3] See Eckstein (1961) for further discussion on this point.

youth led organizations. Their inexperience will be the downfall unless they get the proper education and coaching. Moreover, the youth population in Libya has never experienced an election, or taken part in any form of civic engagement. "Many young people have idealistic expectations of rapid transformation of the country and expect immediate and durable improvements in politics as well as economic inclusion. Moreover, if disappointed, this massive fringe of the population could lead the country to instability and unrest [16]. The youth is a volatile segment of the population that needs to be educated in a way that they contribute positively to the democratization process for generations to come.

Political and civic participation is the third obstacle. Briefly touched upon in the other two themes, civic participation is a very important element. Only Libyans over the age of sixty have experience parliamentary elections, and have been governed by a constitution. The most logical argument put fourth is to re-enact the 1951 constitution, making amendments and other changes slowly. This way order can be instituted, and the officials and the population can get a feel for how to go about the day-to-day business of running a democracy.

III. DEMOCRATIZATION AND THE MIDDLE EAST

The last wave of democratization that swept across Eastern Europe and Latin America throughout the 1980's and 1990's virtually ignored the Arab world.[4] This is commonly referred to as the 'third wave of democratization' coined by Samuel Huntington. This is an essential piece of literature in the field of comparative politics and democratic transitions. The focus is essentially on the fall of the Soviet Union and the transitioning governments from the socialist and authoritarian influence [17]. Academics seemed to be content with accepting the notion that democracy cannot exist in the Arab world. They based their assumptions on either the cultural or political economic arguments for stability. In addition, specific regime typology in the Arab world provided insight into the reasons for a lack of democratization in the region. Some have argued that the third wave of democratization was over, and that transitions to democracy have come to a halt [18]. However, with the current revolutions taking place in the Arab world, democratization is very much alive. Moreover, the reasons for the stability of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world are being reconsidered in light of the revolutions.

Scholars studying the Middle East seemed to focus on the reasons why democracy has missed the Arab world. Despite the third wave transitions in Eastern Europe and Latin America, the Middle East was simply unscathed by the democratic revolutions that swept across the globe. Their reasoning differed from state typology, and cultural and economic explanations, yet the focus remained on how and why the Arab world was able to bypass democratization. These theories held weight until 2011 when the entire Arab

world began to experience revolutions toward democracy, which no one in the West or the Middle East predicted.

Cultural explanations focus on the incompatibility of Islam and democracy. The argument of a democracy gap in the Middle East is consistent with the notion of a Muslim gap, where culture and religion are seen as the reasons for the lack of Middle Eastern democracies [19], [20]. Further, "the prevailing cultural theory for the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East, often labeled, following the influential work of Edward Said, 'orientalist,' posits an intrinsic incompatibility between democratic values and the Islamic religion that dominates the region" [21].

Others take a different approach. One interesting argument is that the Middle East lacks the prerequisites of democracy. This approach seems to combine both cultural and political economic reasoning. "The Middle East and North Africa lack the prerequisites of democratization. The lack of a strong civil society, a market-driven economy, adequate income and literacy levels, democratic neighbors, and democratic culture explains the region's failure to democratize" [22]. Others outright reject the cultural approach arguing "neither culture nor religion offers a convincing explanation for the Arab democracy deficit" [23]. Political economy arguments often surround the argument of oil keeping stability in the oil rich states [24], [25].

Prior to the revolutions, the Arab world by and large consists of two types of regime. Either one party authoritarian states such as Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, and Libya; or monarchies like Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, and the Gulf countries. One can observe that the one party authoritarian states have experienced the revolutions in full force, whereas the oil rich Gulf monarchies have been able to whether the sweeping revolutions. What is essential to understand when discussing this dichotomy is the basis of legitimate authority. Does the state hold legitimacy in being able to provide services and modernization to its citizens? For the one party authoritarian states, the answer is no. The reality is that people were submissive to authority out of fear of what the alternative may be.

The monarchies have been able to whether the revolutions for two reasons. One is the proper redistribution of oil rents to the population.[5] The other is an intrinsic sense of legitimacy embodied by the rulers because of their apparent ties to a higher power. Being a King or Prince holds legitimacy in and of itself in the people's eyes because of the role that faith plays in Middle Eastern politics.

Of course, these theories and assumptions will now have to be revaluated due to the democratic revolutions taking place. More importantly for this paper, to understand the case of Libya it is best to observe the situation through a slightly different lens. We can look to Goldstone to provide a preliminary analysis and framework for evaluating the Arab revolutions, in particular Libya.

Reference [26] argues that aside from the one party authoritarian regimes and monarchies, there is another type of dictatorship in the Middle East, the sultanistic regime. This type of regime is the most vulnerable to revolution because it

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[4] See Goldstone, Jack A. 1980. Theories of revolution: the third generation. *World Politics,* 32: (3) 425-453 for complimentary information.

[5] Libya is the anomaly in this explanation. Libya is an oil rich state, yet even the oil wealth was not enough to mask the oppressive Qaddafi regime. Oil wealth failed to provide stability and legitimacy in the government.

is the least stable. These sultanistic regimes arise when the leaders are focused on nothing except maintaining their personal authority over the state. The leader will expand their powers at the expense of the population and institutions of the state, often ruling above the institutions that are designed to constrain them. Dictators like this amass a tremendous fortune usually through resource wealth like oil. In turn they use this wealth to pay themselves first and to buy the support of the elites and the other supporters of the regime. The military is kept divided into separate forces of command and each section is responsible for reporting directly to the leader which allows for the control and manipulation of the state [26].

Other elements to consider further is the ability of these sultanistic leaders to keep the population "depoliticized and unorganized" by controlling elections and political parties. When combined with surveillance, media control, and intimidation, these efforts generally ensure that citizens stay disconnected and passive [26]. Goldstone's arguments are very representational of the situation in Libya. What has been described by Goldstone above is a general description of the origins of revolution in the Middle East; in particular, Libya provides an example to assess the Arab revolutions in a comparative context. The focus of this paper and presentation is to demonstrate the role of civil society in the development of democracy and to illustrate through the example of Muammar al-Qaddafi that "power that is too concentrated can be difficult to hold on to" [26].

IV. STRONG STATES AND WEAK STATES, TUNISIA AND LIBYA

Actually experiencing a successful transition to democracy is in many cases very unlikely. Democracy is dependent on the relationship between state and civil society, more specifically, the overall strength or weakness of state and society [3], [27]. There are weak states and strong states in the Middle East, of the two types, states with regimes that are weak both in the legitimacy and capacity of the ruling party, tend to illustrate that democracy is less likely to occur here.

Conversely, the second type deals with regimes where the power of the ruling party and the state as a whole is strong. The acquisition of power in these cases is easy; however, the consolidation of power and a viable transition to democracy is very difficult. In contrast, democratization is more likely to occur where the regime that is falling is strong. In these cases the acquisition of power is difficult, but the consolidation of power and a transition to democracy comes much easier [3], [27].

Many of the regimes in the Middle East fell because their power was weakening. As a result, transitions to democracy in these weak regime states are more difficult for several reasons. Namely, the transitions are taking place in states where there is extreme state weakness and inability to support a democratic transition institutionally and socially. Also, more often than not, the new powers that are emerging do not have in themselves democratic interests or structures because the state usually has a very weak civil society to begin with. Transitions in weak states do not usually result in a lot of turnover within the elite structures of the regime.

Moreover, last minute uprisings do not result in dramatic change to the elites of the old regime because there is no sustained opposition or pro-democracy movements that lead to a meaningful transition to democracy [3], [27]. Finally, there is often little institutional change brought about in a weak state transition. This is also a result of the rapid and convoluted collapse of weak regimes where little institutional reforms actually take place during the uprisings. In summation, weak state transitions to democracy take place where there is a weak state, ruling party and civil society [3].

Transitions to democracy in strong states are more difficult because strong regimes and state organizations can resist forces that threaten their power. However, when they do succeed in the acquisition of power democracy is more likely to succeed. The emerging powers in strong state transitions are more likely to favour democracy internally and externally. This is often the result of a robust civil society. Elite turnover is more extensive in strong state transitions resulting in better conditions for a successful transition. Strong states also have a better capacity to handle a transition than weak states do. Finally, in strong state transitions there is likely to be significant institutional change [3], [28].

If we compare Libya and Tunisia based on the method and theoretical framework set out above we will see that these two cases have significant difference in the challenges they face post-revolution, but also the revolutions were sparked for different reasons in each country. If we use reference [3] and [27] as frameworks of analysis, we can compare the situations in Libya and Tunisia based on three critical criteria; regime state, and civil society. The strength or weakness of each of these three criteria will provide reasonable insight as to whether democratization will succeed or fail in the respective cases.

Ben Ali was a dictator that seemed to be an unlikely target for a democratic revolution given that Tunisia was seen as an Arab world success story. However, the image Ali portrayed of himself and Tunisia was a façade. Behind all of the positive things in Tunisia, people still lacked the basic rights of free speech, and a free press as well as other oppressions of basic human rights. Ali was a strong leader who ruled with an iron fist, but held on to the basis of his legitimacy quite well by providing for the people and maintaining legitimacy. Ben Ali made Tunisia seem like a modern, tourist friendly Arab country.

Like most other Arab states, Ben Ali's regime consisted of an extensive system of patronage among the elites, who were largely relatives of his in one way or another. Tunisians referred to this vast system simply as 'the family' [29]. Upon the collapse of the Ben Ali government, this vast system of family patronage has been significantly fragmented and will likely result in significant changes among the elite.

However, Ben Ali's administration was not dependent on a system of bribery to the extent other Arab states were. This means that the government institutions in Tunisia were relatively healthy and functioning like proper state institutions should. The institutional change will be brought about by the new powers to be in Tunisia, what is important is that Tunisia has functioning institutions that can more easily be shaped democratically, rather than having to build and create democratic institutions out of nothing. This fact will

contribute to the success of democratization on Tunisia [29].

The Tunisian state was among the most progressive among the Arab world. Tunisia has the Arab world's best education system, a large middle class, and very robust civil society rooted in a strong labour movement. However, there were class divisions and the revolution spread inward from the rural areas into the cities, and was largely based upon a strong labour movement [29]. This labour movement and class division in Tunisia was the rudiment of a strong civil society, and the basis of what is shaping up to be a successful revolution toward democracy.

Libya in contrast is faced with significantly different challenges. Qaddafi was not a strong ruler, he was a ruthless dictator who was seen a nuisance to the region and the international community as a whole. He squandered the countries oil wealth leaving the population starving in a dire state. His failed attempt to consolidate power lasted 42 years, which was 42 years of hellacious conditions in Libya. Qaddafi was a weak leader that retained power because he worked hard keep people in a situation where they were focused on their survival and not concerned with government. This is partially why the international community did not hesitate to intervene in Libya. It was a simple task for them to launch a bombing campaign and oust Qaddafi.

The regime was as weak and as fragmented as the population was. It too resorted to the traditional tribal and regional divisions for security and support. Even the military was divided and not a cohesive institution. On that note, Libya has no institutions to aid in the transition to democracy. They are simply non-existent. The Libyan state was and is a failed state. Their problems are not with challenges to democratization, but rather Libya needs to build the basic structure of a state. It is state building that is the primary concern in Libya, not democratization [29].

Civil society in Libya is nonexistent. Qaddafi made calculated moves during his reign to oppress and virtually prohibit any form of civil society. Therefore, the revolution was more of a domino effect from Tunisia and Egypt. Moreover, in Libya civil society organizations did not contribute to overthrowing Qaddafi because they did not exist. Without an intervention form NATO, Qaddafi would have likely been able to violently put down this uprising. In addition, because civil society in Libya is virtually imaginary, the powers to be in Libya are not democratic in themselves, and are likely not seeking democracy. Libya consists of fragmented, ragtag militias competing for power, not strong civil society organizations focused on democratization.

By comparing Tunisia and Libya within this framework, we can see the differences in what sparked the revolutions, and we can see the challenges ahead for both countries. A successful transition to democracy is more likely in a state where there is a strong regime, a strong state, and a robust civil society. In the Tunisian case this is evident and the progress of the democracy movement there is the proof. The Ben Ali regime was strong and difficult to oust. The state is also strong with functioning institutions already in place. And finally, there is a robust civil society rooted in the labour movement and committed to democracy.

In Libya on the other hand, the regime was weak and fragmented as a result of Qaddafi's poor management and ruthless oppression. Libya is also very isolated as a result of Qaddafi. And moreover, there is no state to really speak of in Libya as far as institutions, organizations, and relationships with other countries go. It is essentially a failed state. Finally, civil society is a necessary condition for democratization, and in Libya there is currently absolutely no civil society that can carry a movement toward democratization. So while the Arab Spring is a term used to describe the revolution across the Middle East, it is very important to consider the individual conditions of each country because this is not a cohesive revolution. There are significant differences in the challenges facing individual countries, and there are differences in the motives behind each uprising.

TABLE I: CSO'S RECOGNIZED BY THE UN

Civil Society Organizations		
Comparing Tunisia and Libya	Libya	Tunisia
Number of UN recognized civil society organizations in each respective country.	28	101

Table I: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: NGO Branch.

V. CONCLUSION

Given the circumstances in the Middle East in general, methods of good governance, not necessarily democracy are the primary focus of emerging governments and civil society. The revolutions sweeping across the Middle East are more about dignity and human rights, and less about a desire for democracy. The states that have overthrown their old regimes need to focus on the role civil society can play in developing good governance models that can provide much needed stability, which will help guide them through a long and painful process towards democracy that has only just begun.

For Tunisia, the powerful civil society that is prevalent is a driving force, and plausibly a casual factor in the successful transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one. Unfortunately, in Libya, a transition to democracy will likely be a failure. This can be attributed to the lack of civil society within the state. With this contrast, one cannot simply ignore the relationship between civil society and democracy. However, it cannot be concluded that a lack of civil society or a robust civil society is single cause for success or failure of democracy respectively. Rather, it can be concluded that the strength or weakness of civil society, acting in conjunction with other political elements, critically effects whether a democratic transition will be a success or failure.

I acknowledge that the arguments presented within this paper regarding civil society may be vague. The goals are lofty and the obstacles are broad, however the purpose here was to provide an understanding of the difficulties states like Libya will face when attempting to democratize because of their lacking prerequisites. Conversely, states like Tunisia have a realistic fighting chance. If nothing else we can look to these frameworks of analysis presented in this paper in the comparative context to get a better understanding of why transitions to democracy will fail or succeed.

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