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Ruling Coalitions and Chances of Democratization in Arab Countries

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at analyzing three Arab regimes which since 2011 have experienced mass protests. Before the outbreak of such protests, Tunisia, Egypt and Syria shared some common characteristics which made these countries eligible for broad comparison: the existence of a hegemonic party, broad repressive apparatuses and an important public sector. By exploring the different relations between the state, the party and the military before the crisis it should be possible to assess whether the establishment of a liberal democracy is a real perspective or not. How the properties of previous regimes impact on the eventual outcome of a political crisis is one of the most debated topics in the literature. As working hypotheses, we could pose that the limited role of the army is more likely to favor a democratic evolution in the Tunisian case, whereas the absent or even partial separation of the military from state and party institutions in the other two cases makes this perspective more uncertain.

KEYWORDS

Arab regimes, transitions, democracy, authoritarianism, ruling coalition, civil-military relations.

SINTESI

Questo saggio analizza tre regimi arabi che a partire dal 2011 hanno conosciuto fenomeni di proteste di massa. Tunisia, Egitto e Siria condividevano, infatti, alcune caratteristiche che ne facilitano la comparazione: l'esistenza di un partito in posizione egemonica, l'estensione degli apparati repressivi e un settore pubblico importante. Analizzando l'intensità delle relazioni tra lo Stato, il partito e l'apparato militare prima della crisi è possibile, dunque, determinare le concrete possibilità di evoluzione verso una forma di democrazia liberale. Le eredità lasciate dal regime precedente sono, infatti, in letteratura uno dei fattori più importanti per le implicazioni successive. Il ruolo limitato dell'esercito, nel caso tunisino, e la sua separazione dal partito e dallo Stato rendono, dunque, questo caso più promettente.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Regimi arabi, transizioni, democrazia, autoritarismi, coalizioni di potere, relazioni civili-militari.

1. INTRODUCTION

Crisis of authoritarianism can lead to democratization, but the perspectives of transition and democratic consolidation are uncertain or at least affected by the permanence of factors and actors which characterized the previous regime (Linz and Stepan 1996). The aim of the present paper is to assess the chances of transition in three Arab polities – Tunisia, Egypt and Syria – considering the relation between state, (“hegemonic”) parties and the military apparatuses before the beginning of the crisis. These cases have been selected according to some common features. First of all, they all were republics. Second, although some of them partially displayed the characters which Beblawi and Luciani (1987) identified for rentier states, they could hardly be defined as such. Indeed, rents were limited and played only a residual role helping to maintain the crucial function of curbing dissent by the repressive apparatuses. However, they were not of such importance to ensure the maintenance of the regime¹. Third, and most important, they all displayed with variations a strong interrelation between the state machine, the party in power and the military/repressive apparatuses. These conditions have evolved over the years but remained important at the beginning of the crisis.

We will proceed as follows. In the second chapter we will examine the literature on authoritarianism in the region. In particular we will try to answer the question why authoritarian regimes have been able to survive in a world growingly marked by democratic legitimacy. The inadequacy of the ‘transition paradigm’ has been challenged in the literature (Carothers 2002). While Middle East countries had endorsed some liberalization, they still remained authoritarian (Hinnebusch 2006). Autocrats proved to be ‘adaptable’ (Stacher 2012). Regime transformation has been labeled as an ‘upgrading’ authoritarianism (Heydemann 2007). Regimes were able to endure simply by putting under control liberalization to the advantage of a narrowing elite. Nonetheless, the crisis of legitimacy proved to be so profound to detonate in a precise moment with a snowballing effect (Huntington 1991: 102) emanated from Tunisia to finally contaminate the entire region. Whether such regimes could evolve to stable democracies is debatable (Valbjørn 2012; Hinnebusch 2013).

We will limit our analysis to the selected cases. It is well accepted in the literature on the Middle East that beyond some common features the political outcomes of the democratization process in these cases are more likely variegated (Hinnebusch 2013).

The third chapter examines the three regimes before their crisis, focusing on their analogies. We do believe that the shared characteristics explain why

¹ It may be true, perhaps, that some of the regimes under investigation pursued a “rentier strategy” in a condition of rents’ decline (for the role of rent in Egypt, see Richter 2007). Monarchies have generally shown a greater capacity to resist to opposition demands posed by the new challenges. The reasons for that are various and will not be explored. However, most of them completely fall into the typology of the rentier state.

such regimes have survived so far and how the paths of state formation have hampered their evolution after the Arab uprising.

The fourth chapter investigates the relations between the military apparatuses, the state and the party². The three regimes are considered according to the weight of these “pillars”. In particular, following Huntington (1968: 12-24), it is possible to “measure” the degree of institutionalization of these three pillars along four axes: the degree of mutual autonomy, their internal coherence, complexity and adaptability. The fifth chapter argues about the effects of the economic liberalization since the 90s. Its impact has either reduced (at least partially) the economic weight of the military apparatus (in the Egyptian and Syrian cases) or created the pre-conditions for the development of a middle class that has grown autonomously from the state (Egypt and Tunisia). In the conclusion, some general evaluations on the possibility of a positive outcome will be made by considering how such transitions have started. We can anticipate that, besides the analogies, differences proved to be significant and, at least, in the Tunisian case, the lesser weight of the military makes a democratic evolution more likely. Conversely, the absence, or even the only partial separation between the state and the military makes this perspective uncertain in the other two cases.

2. LITERATURE: HOW STATE FORMATION HAS SHAPED THE FUTURE OF ARAB COUNTRIES

The crisis of the authoritarian regimes has been hastened by the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. The end of communist regimes intensified the problem of legitimization of authoritarianism in a world increasingly marked by the acceptance of democratic values (Huntington 1991: 45). Since then, democracy has become the most widespread political regime. Exceptions were the Arab political systems (Stepan and Robertson 2003; Diamond 2010) after an initial and very partial liberalization at the beginning of the 90s (Salamé 1994). Such exceptions have challenged the ‘transition paradigm’ and questioned its adequacy to the Middle Eastern states (Carothers 2002). In particular such paradigm, based mainly on the influential work of O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986), relied on five tenets, the most important being that transition to democracy was an unavoidable and universal trend, that transition necessarily led toward a form of established democracy, the determinative importance of elections and the poor weight of the underlying condition, such as political history, institutional legacies, and other ‘structural’ features in defining the outcome of the transition process (Carothers 2002: 6-8; Mahoney 2000). On the contrary, it was found that the Arab autocrats proved to be very adaptable. Ways of adaptation vary (Stacher 2012). However a

² An important part of the literature concerning the regimes of the region confirms this approach. For Tunisia see Camau and Geisser (2003); for Syria see Perthes (2004: 12); for Egypt see Cook (2007).

common ground was the ability of managing transition, in particular economic liberalization, to avoid full political liberalization to the advantage of those in power. According to Hinnebusch (2006: 380-386) populist authoritarian (PA) regimes such as those here considered were able to adjust themselves in order to survive, evolving to a form of post-populist authoritarianism (PPA). Such changes were not completely ineffectual on the shape of the ruling coalitions (Heydemann 2004), but the pillars on which regimes relied remained largely the same. Notwithstanding that, at least one core assumption of the transition paradigm was true: the same old regimes, having lost their populist appeal, had now to face the problem of democratic legitimacy. Popular demands which arose during the Arab uprising enlightened therefore a profound lack of legitimacy, while the timing of such uprisings (beginning of 2011) were certainly linked to a succession problem (at least in Egypt and Tunisia) that we will not investigate any further.

The same pillars of the former or current ruling coalitions remain as important underlying conditions to influence the future outcomes. The concept of ruling coalitions offers a tool to capture the logic of political organizations in otherwise varying systems of rule³. Exploring the relations between the state, i.e. their bureaucratic apparatuses, the military institution and the parties, it is possible to investigate the inner relations of such coalitions. We believe that from this perspective it is possible to identify possible paths of transitions. Structures and organizations do therefore count and endure crisis or transition to question the direction of the transition, to close off certain solutions to the benefit of others. Such an approach that could be defined as “neo-institutionalist” (March & Olsen 1984) remains the most convincing one since bureaucracies, military apparatuses and other organizations shape attitudes, expectations and demands towards solutions which may confirm or not the transition paradigm. We do not deny the importance of other functional or less functional factors that lead to a democratic outcome – the duration of a transition, the degree of violence before and during the transition, the role of civil actors, the degree of participation, etc. – variously described by others (O’Donnell & Schmitter 1986, Przeworski 1991) but we believe that the importance of the analysis of the *ruling coalition* of an authoritarian regimes is, by itself, sufficient to outline the possible path of transition, therefore limiting the description to few factors that will be more systematically treated.

Getting rid of the old élites is, indeed, problematic for the new leaderships which emerge after the transition. The military could indeed keep veto powers. This is broadly outlined in literature (Linz and Stepan 1996: 65-8). On the other hand, also a substantial part of the old political class that came from former single (or hegemonic) parties, especially the second ranks, could still play a role by simply recycling itself into new political forms. The members of the former single parties continue old political cultures in a democratized shape. Furthermore the tendency to recur to patronage, the lack of democratic commitment, the predispo-

3 On coalition formation in non-democracies see Acemoglu et al. (2009).

sition to polarize on values, the propensity to manipulate elections when deeply embedded as political cultures are all factors which may influence or retard democratic consolidation⁴. Besides we may wonder whether the low legitimization of a certain type of authoritarianism – in various ways centered on clientelistic and/or ubiquitous parties and powerful military apparatuses – will cast the basis of democratization or will give way to different authoritarian outcomes. The characteristics of the previous regime interact and shape also the factors mentioned above – the duration, the degree of violence before and during the transition, the degree of participation. As we will see, differences in the structure of power and of relations between the institutions that formed the ruling coalition in the three countries can be largely explained by some historical differences that we shall briefly describe in chapter four. We will argue that the degree of “fusion” between these structures/organizations will adversely affect any democratic possibility. In particular ‘fusion’ will be intended as the opposite of the institutionalization as developed by Huntington (1968: 13-17), much in the sense that they lack mutual autonomy. Once recognized that institutions do matter, the authoritarian resilience or the ability to veto by some apparatuses is explained as the result of their strength much more than their institutionalization.⁵ In other words, such structures maintain their influence not only because they have the power to do so but also because they are not autonomous.

3. STATE, PARTY AND SECURITY APPARATUSES: THE ANALOGIES

The three political systems under consideration show some analogies that facilitate a comparison. In this chapter we will concentrate on these ones and neglect, for the moment, the differences. The existence of these similarities is emphasized also by other authors. For example Kamrava (2000) by classifying Middle-Eastern regimes places our cases in the same category – “Autocratic officer-politicians regimes” – and in the same sub-category – “Mukhaberat states”. The three regimes, plus Yemen, are characterized by a mixed type – civil-military – where the role played by the internal security apparatuses (*mukhaberat*) is taken in serious consideration. The typology provided by Kamrava is scarcely useful in our case and it is not fully convincing as it excludes two cases close to ours such as Iraq of Saddam Hussein and Algeria before the *coup d’etat* of 1992. However, it sets these cases into the right perspective. Three are the features that make them similar:

- a. The existence of a wide state and bureaucracy that, despite recent downsizing and liberalization at least in one case (Tunisia since the 90s), kept a decisive importance as a driving instrument for economic and social development;

4 What Ottaway (2004) referred to as a lack of ‘democratic constituency’.

5 This perspective is outlined by Battera (2012) and Ieraci (2013a, 2013b).

- b. The existence of a hegemonic party (Sartori 1976). The party had initially a mobilizing role during the consolidation of the state to later become a patronage machine. The party has been an instrument of élites' cooptation by selecting new demands and an instrument of societal control (for the Tunisian case see Hibou 2006);
- c. A crucial role assigned to the internal security apparatuses and/or, with a similar role, to the military (Bellin 2004). Some differences, however, emerge since after the "forced retirement" of Bourguiba in 1987 the Tunisian army almost entirely ceased to play a role of internal control: it became growingly professionalized by limiting its task to the defense of national territory. On the contrary, armies in Syria and Egypt acquired such powers to the extent of a direct control of important parts of the economy (and of the society).

These three pillars are decisive to understand the direction of the transitions, since: a) in the absence of a capable state, transition is more likely at risk; b) heavy military apparatuses can jeopardize or affect in a decisive way the outcomes (Agüero 1995 and Pion-Berlin 1997); c) also former single/hegemonic parties can maintain a remarkable conditioning power. Moreover, when parties previously in power were clientelistic, the vacuum of power left by them at the beginning of the transition could be easily filled by new emerging parties which might show paradoxically the same characteristics⁶: territorial anchorage and capacity of mobilization and redistribution.

All the three regimes experienced a remarkable growth of state bureaucracy during the 60s-70s (Owen 2004: 23-38). This was confirmed by the growth of the expenditures of the central governments (on GDP) which grew from 29.7% in 1960 (18.3% in 1955) for Egypt to 55.7% in 1970. A similar growth is recorded also for Syria – from 23.5% to 37.9% – and for Tunisia – from 20.7% to 40.7% – during the same decade (Owen 2004: 25). Although in the Egyptian case expenditures experienced a contraction during the 80s due to the liberalization policy (*infitah*) of Sadat, the weight of the state remained substantial (they still reached a peak in 1992 : 57.5%)⁷. Public employment was rated around 6 million during the 00s (9.58% of the population and about 1/3 of the total employees) with over 800.000 employees in the armed forces (a man every 84 citizens; 180.000 in 1966) and 150.000 policemen (UN-DPADM 2004).

The enlargement of state bureaucracy in Syria occurred during the same decade: while in 1960 the state employed only 34.000 public employees, this number grew to 251.000 in 1975. More recent estimations counted about 1.2 million public employees and 400.000 retired (Bar 2006: 427). To these figures,

6 See for Egypt the revealing article by Vannetzel (2007).

7 Source: FMI.

180.000 men from the armed forces must be added since the 70s, and a total of over 400.000 during the 00s (a man in arms every 43 citizens). That means about half of the entire workforce (25% in the Egyptian case).

Tunisia experienced a similar process of expansion. The bureaucracy grew from 80.000 in 1960 to nearly half a million during the mid-90s (including the employees in state controlled companies). However, diversely from the cases described above, the army remained of modest size – before the crisis it was about 47.000 men in arms (1 every 212 citizens) – since both Ben Ali and Bourguiba feared a possible *coup d'état*. Nevertheless, the internal security apparatuses – the *Sûreté nationale* – amounted between 50.000 and 80.000 men before the regime breakdown in 2011. In this case only, the ratio between the armed forces and the police was inverted. This was due to the greater importance in the ruling coalition assigned to the Ministry of interior in the Tunisian case (Ben Ali himself came from the Ministry of interior and not from the military as Hafiz al-Assad and Mubarak)⁸.

The policies of liberalization had also different outcomes. Started in the 70s, liberal reforms in Egypt and Tunisia were strengthened at the beginning of the 90s under the presidencies of Mubarak and Ben Ali. In Syria, liberal reforms introduced during the 00s under the presidency of Bashar upset the internal power balances as we will consider in the two following chapters. However, the effects were different in terms of the weight of public employment between 1988 and 1998 (WB 2004: 98): while in Tunisia during that decade there had been a modest contraction of public employment, in Egypt a further increase was recorded. In Egypt the state continued to be an essential dispenser of services and the main employer in the non-agricultural sector and, generally, state expenses for salaries and pensions continued to grow. The only important cut was that for subsidies of some primary goods that have damaged the purchasing power of the poorest classes (Richter 2007: 184 and 187).

Nearly the same holds true for Syria: the public sector continued to dominate the petrochemical industry, the banks and half of the manufacturing production. Although before the crisis 75% of the workforce in the manufacturing sector was privately employed, the state continued to limit heavily the role of the private sector by keeping the size of private firms (Perthes 2004: 30-31).

According to Ayubi (2009: 289-328) these regimes shared the same *étatiste* approach⁹, the central role played by the armed forces or, alternatively, the internal security apparatuses, and the leading role of the hegemonic party. Besides formal multipartitism – electoral processes lacked any credibility –, through the ban of the religious parties (i.e. the Muslim Brotherhood and its national branches) and

8 Despite its separation from the other two pillars of power – the bureaucracy and the party – according to Camau and Geisser (2003: 207 and 211) the army remained a group of interests that central power had necessarily to take into account.

9 Here and there in the text we use the term “socialist” policies, although we do not mean a total nationalization of economic activities, as together with the public sector in all three cases a modest private sector persisted since the independence.

the granting to the oppositions of a 20% of the legislature seats, the Tunisian RCD (ex PSD under Bourguiba) maintained in fact a steady control of the parliaments, similarly to the Egyptian NDP. We cannot be deceived by the low formal affiliation to the *Ba'ath* in the Syrian parliament (54%). Only 14% of the seats was assigned to other parties which were part of the National Progressive Front (*al-Jabha*) dominated by the *Ba'ath* party, while the residual parliamentarians were unaffiliated MPs that were subject to the approval of the *Ba'ath*¹⁰.

In all three cases, the hegemonic parties deeply penetrated the society through an all-pervading structure of local branches endowed with the redistribution of resources to loyal citizens. Some evaluations put a million registered members for the Tunisian PSD in the middle of the 80s (Camau and Geisser 2003: 181). These figures remained nearly the same with the subsequent RCD at the moment of the regime breakdown. In the Syrian case, the figures for the *Ba'ath* party were relatively more modest in relation to the population that is the double as that of Tunisia at least until the middle of the 80s: about 500.000 members in 1985 (Van Dam 2011: 128). This was partially due to a more selective recruiting procedure¹¹. In fact, such selective procedures seemed to have been abandoned later on. According to the data reported by Bar (2006: 359) during the beginning of Bashar tenure, the party members were around 1.8 million (18% of the adult population)¹². However, this expansion of the dominant parties in the society, in all the three cases, marked in fact the decline of the party as a decisional body and its rise as a mere instrument of patronage.

The relation with the oppositions was ruled through cooptation (Ottaway and Choucair-Vizoso 2008). If in Tunisia and Syria religious parties were repressed and the religious establishment was held under strict control – mosques' imams were to be approved by the government – in the Egyptian case a sort of coexistence with the religious establishment was set up (*al-Azhar* remained for the most autonomous): independent candidates related to the Muslim Brotherhood got a limited access to parliament and the organization was free to complement the state in the society by delivering social services by itself (Ben Néfissa 2007: 19). Only in the Egyptian and Tunisian cases the trade unions, at least at the lower levels, maintained a relative autonomy¹³.

10 They were mostly businessmen, religious and tribal leaders (Perthes 2004: 21).

11 This figure has to be divided between full *membership*, about 1/5 of the total members, and the “supporters” (*nasir*).

12 The figures for Egyptian NDP were more modest in relation to the population (probably eight times as much the Tunisian one): only 1.9 million of members at the moment of the regime breakdown (<http://egyptelections.carnegieendowment.org/2011/09/22/national-democratic-party>). There was certainly an organizational problem given the demographic size of the country. However, in the Egyptian case, according to Ben Néfissa (2007: 18 and n. 48) clientelistic exchange were directly controlled by MPs or by senior public officers, most of them party cadres. Such NDP dominance on local politics is proved by the last results of local elections (2002): the NDP gained nearly all the seats and in 60% of the cases unopposed.

13 The Syrian case was different as the unions became part of the party (Perthes 2004: 12).

4. SYSTEMIC DIFFERENCES: THE RELATIONS AMONG ARMY, BUREAUCRACY AND THE PARTY

Despite the fact that in all three cases the pillars of the ruling coalition supporting the regime were the same, significant differences ascribable to the role of the military in relation with the other institutions – the party and the bureaucracy – can be easily noticed. In short, while in Egypt “the military ruled but did not govern” (Cook 2007), in Tunisia they neither governed nor ruled, and in Syria they certainly governed and ruled.

In Tunisia, under Bourguiba, the army was kept separated from the other two institutions by forbidding to its members to join the party (Camau & Geisser 2003: 165). The army remained an integral part of the ruling coalition up to the 2011 revolt: the participation to the repression during the bread riots in 1984 is an example of that. However, unlike the Syrian and Egyptian cases, the members of the military were strictly excluded from government positions. Under Bourguiba, local governorships (*wilayat*) were led by members of the party, while under Ben Ali most of them were in the ranks of the Ministry of Interior. Similarly, the members of government coming from the same Ministry grew due to the security turn after the repression of the religious movement in the 90s. This event coincided with an important transformation of the relationships between the party and the state. The military kept the same position as regards the other two institutions previously held: they were able to negotiate the defense budget but were kept apart from the government and the party. What changed under the transition from Bourguiba to Ben Ali was the relation between the state and the party: if under Bourguiba the party – PSD at that time – occupied key posts inside the state institutions, the rise of Ben Ali marked the downsizing of the party as an instrument of policy decision and the rise of technocrats that for the most were not party cadres but were imposed to the party. The party remained altogether an important patronage machine at the peripheral levels, managing the redistribution of resources (Camau & Geisser 2003: 217). It is not by chance that the rise of technocrats coincided with the expansion of liberalization policies sponsored by the presidency that directly assumed the control of growing resources (Camau & Geisser 2003: 197).

Such separation of the army from the other institutions was only partial in the Egyptian case. In this case, the party was kept separated from the army but there was no separation between the army and the state. Members of the army were part of the government – they controlled the presidency – both through ministerial functions and local power (the governorships). Their downsizing in the central government (Cooper 1982) was balanced by their growing role in the economy¹⁴. In Egypt, the establishment of technocratic governments that followed the

14 The Ministry of Defense and military production alone still employs about 40.000 people. It controls the military industry (about 100.000 additional employees). Some evaluations put about 1/3 of the civil production – infrastructures, services and first necessity goods – provided by factories controlled by retired members of the armed forces.

liberalization policies that, similarly to the Tunisian case, reduced the functions of the hegemonic party (NDP) to a mere patronage machine concurred in fact to maintain and consolidate all the functions pertaining to the army including the economic ones. On one side, the army reduced its direct control on the party, on the other, it gained an increasing power of indirect control that was not affected by economic liberalization¹⁵. Actually if these policies eroded the NDP legitimacy to the advantage of religious networks, the capacities of the military apparatus to maintain consensus to the advantage of the system through the redistribution of essential goods remained unchanged. The army had grown as a state inside the state as central power reduced its redistributive capacity. As Richter (2007) affirms, it was the army that increasingly took care of the redistributive capacities that were once provided by the state, also thanks to its direct connection with external important resources (US funded military aid). However, this took place in competition with the religious networks. If liberalizations downsized public expenses (from 47 USD per person during 1980-85 to 37 in 2001-04) military expenses doubled thanks to the US aid; most of them as off-budget resources (Richter 2007: 184). Being a member of the army ensured a privileged position: the possibility of purchasing houses and goods at subsidized prices; the possibility for officers' relatives to get access to an educational and health system separated from that of the public system which was growingly inefficient; the possibility for retired officers to get new remunerative jobs (Richter 2007: 185).

Such socio-economic role of the army was even more important in Syria where the army were deeply rooted in the society, even more than in Egypt (1 man in arms every 43 citizens against 1 every 84). In Syria, the army directly controlled most of the important assets as the oil resources, partially excluded from the state budget. Liberalization had certainly an effect: the state ceased to be the main dispenser of services and the only employer. Here too, the liberalization policies had affected the redistributive capacity of the state through the party, especially in the rural areas¹⁶. It was under this perspective that important sectors of the army considered Lebanon as a source of personal income (Bar 2006: 408). However, unlike Egypt, the fusion between bureaucracy, the party and the military was far deeper. Similarly to the case of PSD led by Bourguiba, the *Ba'ath* had profoundly colonized the state in the years of Hafiz al-Assad and had penetrated the army already before its rise in 1970. However it was rather the army which came to dominate the party since the highest ranks of the army constituted also the highest ranks of the party and the most important sectors of local administration¹⁷. Such security control intensified in the 80s as

15 It is not by chance that in the 90s cuts agreed with the IFIs reduced subsidies goods to citizens by 14%, while the budget of the army increased by 22% (Bellin 2004: 148).

16 Still today about 1/3 of the workforce is employed in the agriculture and ¼ of GDP comes from this sector.

17 Except for Damascus, the governorships (*muhafazat*) were in fact governed by security committees composed by the governor of the province (usually a military man to be appointed by

security priorities pressed for a harsher control of the oppositions¹⁸. The fusion between state-party and the military was therefore thicker and dominated by the military¹⁹. Such power structure took also an “ethnic-confessional” look given the nature of the cleavages in Syria that are less significant in the other two cases²⁰.

Table 1 summarizes the degree of fusion of the two institutions with the military apparatus including the economic sector that in two cases was crucial for the army. In the Tunisian case, the exclusion of the army or of some of its members, even retired, from the economic sector marked an important difference compared to the other two cases.

Tab.1 Ruling Coalitions at the Beginning of the Crisis:
the Degree of Fusion with the Military Apparatuses

Countries	State	Party	Economy
Egypt	HIGH	ABSENT	HIGH
Syria	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH
Tunisia	ABSENT	ABSENT	ABSENT

These differences in the power structure of the ruling coalitions are partially due to different historical developments that we will briefly describe. By “fusion” we do not mean that party and army are to be considered as one single institution – also other authors (Bar 2006; Stacher 2012) point out that, to a certain extent, these institutions could be competitors²¹ – but that important members of one of them have positions of responsibility also in the other.

the Ministry of interior), the head of the local party and those in charge of the internal security (*mukhabarat*) (Perthes 2004: 12).

18 This followed the 1982 crisis which led to the harsh repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama. The repression caused at least 10.000 casualties.

19 For example, the promotions of the party needed the approval of the security apparatuses (Perthes 2004: 12).

20 The Syrian political set is complicated by the sectarian cleavages. Such condition is irrelevant in Egypt or Tunisia that are much more homogeneous or where only a regional prevalence can be noticed. In Syria, a series of historical circumstances that will not be investigated any further (see Batatu 1981 and 1999) determined the dominance of the security apparatuses and of the élite army units by the Alawi community (10-12% of the population). Alawi controlled up to 90% of the higher ranks of the security services (Zisser 1998; Van Dam 2011). The Sunni majority (60-70% of the population) was under-represented. However, according to Bar (2006) defining the Syrian regime as “Alawi” is incorrect (Bar 2006) as family strategies forced leading members in the regime to co-opt important Sunni families from Damascus and some Sunni rural governorships – in particular Der’a and Dayr az-Zawr – were well-represented both in the party and in the highest ranks of the army at least until the beginning of the crisis.

21 For example, in Syria the party, to a certain extent, offered a certain protection to its members from interferences by the security apparatuses. However, the same apparatuses gave a final approval to the candidacy of party membership.

Tunisia gained independence in 1956. It was the party (*Neo-Destur*, which later became PSD) that led the country to independence and it was within the party that factional fight occurred. Once this was resolved, under Bourguiba the party became an instrument for strengthening the state. Tunisia already had a bureaucratic apparatus which dated back to the *beylical* governments and which was strengthened by France (Ayubi 2009). After independence, the party became an instrument of mobilization and penetration of the society. It was the party that further extended the authority of the state. The army did not contribute to such strengthening while it kept an important role of regime guardianship.

Quite differently, the army became the main instrument of state strengthening both in Egypt and Syria, after the coup of the “free officers” (1952) and the 1970 coup of Hafiz al-Assad. The latter put an end to a long period of political instability marked by a sequence of coups that had started in the 40s. The *Ba’ath* dominance dates back to 1963 but between this date and 1970 another coup occurred as the result of factionalism in the army and in the party²². Syrian history, until that date, was marked by the slow party conquest of the army, however after al-Assad coup the factional conflict ended as the ethno-confessional dominance in the army had been finalized. Party dominance therefore preceded the military one. The party and the army fused together and strengthened a state that was up to that time very weak. In Syria, such fusion shows a pattern similar to that of some communist regimes (Perlmutter & Leogrande 1982):

- a. Between the party and the army: while there is in the party a “military’ section that rules the role of the party in the army, the army dominance on the party rests on a structure that is quite more important: the Regional Command²³. In the Regional Command, the military, although a minority at least since the X Congress (2005), were in any case the most influent members;
- b. Between the party and the state: as the Bouguiba PSD, the *Ba’ath* dominated the state and in particular its local branches. Under Bashar liberalization “technocratized” the government to the extent that there was a growing rise of technocrats in the government that were imposed to the party as it happened in the RCD of Ben Ali. However, local politics was still dominated by the party as it maintained a fundamental function of ruling patronage resources;
- c. Between the military and the state: the military were still the most important actor. It absorbed a significant part of the state budget: it remained one of the

22 The 1963 coup led to power the *Ba’ath* as well as other nationalist formations. Only during 1970 the *Ba’ath* dominance was asserted.

23 The “Regional Command” must be read as the (Syrian) National command and is the equivalent of an executive command. Its name was due to the pan-Arab character of the party which is formally divided in “regional” branches (Iraqi, Syrian, Yemeni, etc.) that are theoretically subordinated to a “National Command” that is inter-Arab. A sort of COMINTERN of the party that has virtually ceased to exist.

most important employers and some government functions, even decentralized, were assigned to men in uniform. Furthermore, contrary to the Tunisian and Egyptian cases, the Syrian one did not show a clear separation between the functions of the Ministry of interior and that of defense. The first one was subordinate to the second and its highest ranks mostly came from the army. Finally, not only the presidential (republican) guard was positioned near the capital, like in the other two cases, but also most of the other élite units²⁴.

In Egypt too, the politicization of the army strengthened the state, but the assertion of a hegemonic party occurred later (in 1962, after ten years from Nasser *coup d'état*). Although the army was an extremely important actor whose functions were not limited to protect the regime as in Tunisia, its functions related to the party were much more limited than in the Syrian case. At least partially, formal distinctions between the army and the Ministry of interior were maintained²⁵. The army remained the most important actor as it is confirmed by the transition. The army remained autonomous from the party and fused only at the top with the state.

If we now consider the four criteria of the institutionalization as described by Huntington in *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968: 12-24) – autonomy, internal coherence, complexity and adaptability – and apply them to the three organizations here examined, we can generally observe that the three systems were deeply modernized at the moment of crisis. For example, the degree of complexity of the institutions was at least formally relevant. All the institutions, including the party, could be classified as complex organizations made by sub-units which were functionally and hierarchically organized. However, some distinctions can be made:

- a. Given the degree of institutional fusion in Syria, the despotic intervention was much more evident. Also its complexity was therefore affected, probably in the army itself. For Huntington (1968: 18), a political system is simple (therefore not complex) when it rests on the role played by individuals. A study by Chouet (1995) describes the Syrian nomenclature as strongly affected by parental and confessional interweaving. This influenced also the degree of coherence of the institutions. According to Huntington (1968: 22), “factionalism” is indeed a proxy for the low internal coherence of an organization;

24 As the 3rd and the 4th divisions.

25 In 2012 military expenses still exceeded those of the Ministry of interior (25.4 billion liras against 22). However, the latter ones had multiplied by six in the last decade against the only doubling of those of the Ministry of defense. In 2012, the Ministry of interior employed 800.000 people (ICG 2012: 10). The growing frustration of the military against Mubarak did not only derive from the succession perspective of Gamal but also from this slide of power in favor of the Ministry of interior which occurred in the last years of Mubarak.

- b. In the other two cases, the degree of *autonomy* between institutions was more pronounced. In the Tunisian case, the army was kept far from the other two. Moreover, the technocratization of the bureaucracy reduced the party role in the government. While this phenomenon is to be traced also in the other two regimes, it is more evident in the Tunisian case;
- c. The party was the weakest organization in all three cases, in particular in the Tunisian and Egyptian cases. The party lacked autonomy as it was completely dependent from the state by performing only an ancillary role. While, in the Syrian case, government functions were still monopolized by the members of the hegemonic party in the other two cases, since the start of liberalization, the affiliation to the party were mostly subordinated to positions in the government.²⁶

As an overall effect of the fusion between institutions, the reform is virtually impossible. The state is controlled by an elite who worries about change. Changes on one side of the ruling coalition may endanger the coalition as such. In the next chapter we will see how liberalizations weakens the ruling coalitions and the resistance they incurred.

5. THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION: THE EFFECTS OF LIBERALIZATION

The liberalization policies were important because they modified power relations inside the ruling coalitions and affected differently the development of the following crises²⁷. Generally, liberalization transformed such regimes from PAs (populist authoritarianisms) to PPAs (post-populist authoritarianisms). This implied a change in the social basis of the regimes: less statist and ‘popular’ and increasingly marked by cronyism and opportunity for private enrichment of the ruling élite (Hinnebusch 2006: 383-384). In the Egyptian and Tunisian cases, the liberalizations showed two distinct phases. First an “opening” (*infitah*) occurred under state initiative without external pressures (the IFIs). The state maintained

²⁶ The *adaptability* is probably the most difficult factor to analyze. In all three cases, the institutions had already overcome several crises. They were able in the past to overcome, at least partially, a generational crisis. With the exception of the dominant parties that had all collapsed during the recent regime crisis, the capacity of adaptation of the army and bureaucracy could be measured only ex-post after the transition. With the exception of the Syrian case where the regime breakdown was accompanied by the partial collapse of the bureaucracy, in Egypt and Tunisia such collapse has never occurred. The reason for that is not that executive authority was much more centralized in Egypt than in Syria, as argued by Stacher (2012: 94), but because fusion was far advanced in Syria and therefore less bureaucratic autonomy was found here than in Egypt.

²⁷ Important works have been devoted on this issue such as Heydemann (2004) and most recently Haddad (2012).

the control of the most important assets but considered favorably the private sector, especially small companies, as this would likely help to broaden consensus from the public sector (bureaucracy) and the working class to the small middle class of the private sector. That at least was the hope of incumbent regimes. In Egypt and Tunisia, policies were inspired by socialism – i.e., the nationalization of bank and industry sectors, in the Egyptian case, and the system of cooperatives in the Tunisian case – but such policies were abandoned in the 70s. In 1975, Sadat launched *infitah* which opened to the private and foreign investments and after 1970 the rise of Hédi Nouira as prime minister in Tunisia marked the departure from the previously experiences in socialism²⁸. The political success of such policies was however limited. Governments clashed with the religious networks in the 80s which benefited from the support of the small middle class. In Syria, liberalization although firstly experienced by the end of the 80s, became a deliberate policy only during the last presidency, after 2000. Such second phase of liberalization which occurred in Egypt and Tunisia under Mubarak and Ben Ali were implemented with the contribution of IFIs and more deeply changed the internal balance of forces which supported the regime.

If the results of *infitah* were controversial from an economic point of view, they however accelerated the transformation of the party from an instrument of mobilization into a mere patronage machine. Furthermore, especially during the second phase, the one which started in the 90s, marked the rise of a technocratic élite at the top of the government and the party, in accordance with a PPA profile which was also required by the International community. Such measures implied to reduce the burden of food and other subsidies to enable governments to reduce debts.

In Egypt, the party transformation occurred already under Sadat at the beginning of the shift from a strict PA to a more PPA outlook. The “nasserist” party (ASU) changed by presidential instigation into a more faded ideological party (NDP). Although this change was initially contested by a faction of the party itself, the transformation was accomplished at the end of 1978 by 250 members of the Parliament who crossed the floor from the ASU to the NDP, followed by the dissolution of the ASU itself. This happened without major obstacles because the political class wanted to maintain the resources that directly derived from the presidency (Kassem 1999: 41). Curiously, the transition from Bourguiba’s PSD to Ben Ali’s RCD occurred ten years later almost in the same way. At the base the party remained substantially the same, what changed was the top. If we

28 In Tunisia, the cooperative sector was limited to agriculture. At the end of 1968 about 1/3 of the land was ruled through the cooperative system which regarded ¼ of the rural population. However, since a good part of rural notables served in the PSD, thanks to their pressure, Bourguiba forced Ben Salah to resign from the Ministry of planning (Perkins: 150-1). In fact, considerable foreign investment flows took place only after the rise of Ben Ali. The years of “liberalism” under Bourguiba were characterized more by the mobilization of local resources. Camau and Geisser (2003:) still call it “authorchic capitalism”.

consider the government positions between 1987 and 2001 under Ben Ali, only 5% retained their posts which were held under Bourguiba and only 30% had been previously members of the PSD, as the promotion to administrative position in the new party was often subsequent to government appointment (Camau and Geisser 2003: 195).

Something similar had happened in Syria during the last decade, although to a lesser extent. Anyhow, in all three cases, such “technocratization” at the top barely affected the party at the local level. Resistances came out especially in Syria and in Egypt. Respectively the X congress and the internal elections of NDP in 2007 signaled the growing apprehension of the party leaders of losing control of the top positions in favor of a new class of businessmen and technocrats promoted by liberalization who were not so far party members (Ben Néfissa 2007: 23-24). In Egypt this new technocratic class looked mainly to Gamal Mubarak, the son of the president in charge, for support. Its rise was therefore strictly linked to the problem of succession. However, such class was feared also by the military who started to worrying to lose their veto power. Their worries joined those of the most despised party cadres that still depended from top prebends. In the Syrian case, it was Bashar himself who took care of these worries. As a consequence, the liberalization process was put under the strict control of the presidency.

Notwithstanding such resistances, technocratization at the top of the hegemonic parties altered the pivotal role previously played by parties as decision-making was placed strictly in the hand of governments. Parties survived as instrument of cooptation but under the liberalization they were reduced to patronage machines. Militancy was no longer inspired by ideological commitment but their growing numbers demonstrate their continued importance as an instrument to get access to state resources for an impoverished society. Their strength in the rural milieu is another sign of the new trend. Being the urban milieu the most favored by liberalization, the party became of secondary importance²⁹. This does not stand out against the control exerted by the urban milieu on government. Simply what was reduced was the importance of the party.

In Syria, the effect of the liberalizations on the party was probably less relevant but nevertheless important. Three growing trends could be found in this case and in the others: a) more and more the government used independent technocrats outside the *Ba'ath*, and membership in the party no longer guaranteed a promotion to the higher levels of the administration (Perthes 2004: 10); b) the party though still “ruralized” (Batatu 1999) lost its ability to process peripheral demands as the liberalizations reversed the distributive policies in favor of the top urban elites (Perthes 2004: 26; Lund 2012a). In 2011, the rebellion against Bashar’s regime started from a rural district (Der’a) which under Hafiz had been one of the major recipient of public resources and one of the strongholds in the Sunni area

29 In Egypt electoral participation rates under authoritarianism were quite lower in the more affluent urban districts.

(Van Dam 2011: 9); c) those who benefitted more from the liberalization was a “new guard” (Haddad 2004; Bar 2006) made of second generation members. This new generation, especially in the Syrian case, limited the access to the market for rivals. Liberalization had, therefore also an adverse effect on the private sector potentiality, as privatizations largely benefitted important members of the establishment that were more linked to powerful families (Haddad 2004; Heydemann 2004; Perthes 2004: 37).

If the party was the institution that benefited less from liberalization, since the military had grown as a state within the state, liberalization initially only marginally affected the military apparatus as a whole. Side effects on the military had been for the most indirect and limited but altogether important. Indeed, maintaining unaltered the power of the military implied the reducing of subsidies for the poorest classes or the opportunities for the power élite. Furthermore, they started to produce their effect quite later and only on the eve of the Arab uprising and for the most regarded only Egypt. Only later the liberalization started to danger military interests once new agreements signed with the IFIs implied a downsizing of the economic weight of the military. Any of such effects, however, must be excluded in the Tunisian case as its military was kept separated from the party and the government. In Egypt, the dormant opposition in the military apparatuses to the eventual rise of Gamal Mubarak is to be read in this perspective. Mubarak’s ousting from power, although risky, has been therefore an opportunity for the military to preserve privileges and an economic autonomous domain that was consistent with its nationalist ethos (Springborg 2011). In the Syrian case, in contrast with later developments, initial liberalization gave instead new opportunities for personal enrichment once Syrian army had been involved in the Lebanon economy (Perthes 2004: 54). Of course such advantages almost ended after Syria disengaged from Lebanon. In Syria effects were altogether marginal for two main reasons: a) liberalization came later and was put under strict control by the top; b) the weight of the army in the state was even heavier than in Egypt. If there has been any disagreement between the army and Mubarak before the crisis of 2011, this was not the case in Syria, since in this case the military apparatuses had allowed the succession from Assad to Bashar (Stacher 2012). In such case, it was the greater fragility of the Syrian economy compared to the Egyptian one that has been emphasized by the loss of Lebanon. The loss of a rental position have probably sped up the regime crisis since its redistributive capacities had been eroded without benefitting from the external aid that supported Egypt in crucial times³⁰.

30 Also oil resources were running out. State capacities, as in the other two cases, mostly depended on the state subventions for first needs goods or for housing. After the reduction of such subventions, the informal Damascus of the Sunni districts has exploded outside state control (Balanche 2012).

6. CONCLUSIONS: PATTERN OF TRANSITION AND POTENTIAL OUTCOMES

In Tunisia and Syria regime crisis started in rural areas that used to be strongly penetrated by the hegemonic party: Sidi Bou Zid and Dera'a respectively. This means that the party was no longer an effective instrument of cooptation, of citizen's control and that was unable to efficaciously select peripheral demands. In the triangular relations among state (bureaucracy), party, and army, the party proved to be the weakest institution. The decline of the state, of its ruling and redistributive capacities, was especially evident as indicated by the decline of the party which had performed auxiliary functions in this regard. However, in the case of the army this was only partially true. There was no decline of the army at least in relation to the state, while there had been a general decline of the controlling capacities of repressive apparatuses. That happened also in Syria (Bar 2006). This was probably the result of the social-economic changes that were influenced by the liberalizations:

- a. In Syria and Egypt, the high growing demographic rates and, in all three cases a sharp increase of urbanization. The state was incapable of providing growing services (first of all jobs) whereas the party reduced its power of controlling and ruling demands. Consequently, also the repressive apparatuses lost their efficacy while the religious networks expanded their action by supporting poor urbanized people (ICG 2004; Balanche 2012);
- b. Liberalizations mainly benefitted affluent strata and only partially the middle class. The middle class of the public sector too suffered of the economic decline (Ben Néfissa 2007: 16) despite governments continued, especially in Syria and Egypt, to maintain a set of subsidies for the public sector. In the Tunisian case, and partially also in Egypt, public sector middle class soon joined the young demonstrators in the protest whereas this did not occur in Syria for two reasons: the greater dependence from the regime and the nature of the confessional cleavages due to the considerable weight of both Alawis and Christians in the bureaucracy³¹.

Patterns of transitions depend on the different weight of the military in relation to state and the party. In Syria and Egypt, the military is the actor that had to lose most from a regime change. We can summarize these patterns by saying that while the military "accelerated" the transition in the Tunisian case, in Egypt the transition was "put under control" by the military and "hampered" in the Syrian case. Similar conclusions are reached also by Lutterbeck (2011).

³¹ About 80% of the workforce in the coast areas where Alawis concentrate is employed in the public sector. The Christian component is also strong in the highest rank of the central administration.

In Tunisia, the army went rapidly back to the barracks after the transition. In Egypt, the army remained as one of the main actors behind the scene notwithstanding that the FJP, the religious party, secured both parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011-12. In Egypt, transition passed through different institutional crisis: between the presidency and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and the presidency and the Constitutional court³². Such institutional conflicts finally ended in July 2013 with the arrest of president Morsi by the army. Having facilitated the starting of the transition, the military again intervened to alter the process. This proved again the central role of the military factor in the Egyptian political system and the strength of the army which as an institution was placed above the former president Mubarak. The Syrian case is different.

While in Tunisia the army was kept separated from the other two institutions, whereas in Egypt a separation was clear only in relation to the party, in Syria the boundaries between the three institutions were not clearly defined. As a result of such “fusion” transition has been impossible. As a result, Syria is suffering from a civil war which is growingly characterized by a confessional/territorial factor (Lund 2012b).

Transitions already in place such as those of Tunisia and Egypt showed important differences. In Tunisia, the discontinuity from the previous regime is clearer – the dissolution of the former hegemonic party and the absence of a political role of the military – whereas in Egypt continuities are more evident: the hegemonic party was dissolved but it was still possible for its members to run for elections; while the military still continues to play a political role. The former looks like a “replacement”; the latter a “transplacement” (Huntington 1991: 142-163). In October 2011 Tunisians elected a constituent assembly which passed a new constitution in January 2014 after long discussions. New political elections are expected probably by the end of 2014. Egypt has proceeded along a different path: a new parliament and a new presidency have appointed a Constituent Assembly, subsequently a *coup d'état* followed and a second constitution has been approved in January 2014.

As we tried to demonstrate, structures of power of the previous regimes are fundamental in understanding the following path of transition. What happened in Egypt with the ousting of Mubarak from power resembles what was argued by Linz and Stepan (1996: 66-68) about the role of the “hierarchical” military (i.e. “military as institution”): when a regime is ruled by military hierarchy and this feels threatened as institution, it could exert pressure on the “military at the government” so that they resign from the political life starting “liberating elections”. However, they could impose, as the price for political liberalization, the preservation of “reserved dominions” and the prolongation of transition (Linz

32 In August 2012, conflict between the SCAF and the presidency started after the presidency announcement to eliminate the constitutional amendments passed onto the SCAF to limit the power of the President of the republic. This was followed by the resignation of Gen. Tantawi from chief of the armed forces.

and Stepan 1996: 56 and 61). This negative situation for an emerging democracy could be challenged only if democratic actors were strong. Notwithstanding the existence of an autonomous civil society and a working judiciary (Rutherford 2008), the capacity of such development remains however uncertain and all the questions which Ottaway (2004) raises about the absence in the Arab world of favorable democratic *constituencies* remains relevant, at least in Egypt.

Tunisia is different. We said that in this case ruptures had been more apparent. No political meddling by the military has been recorded after the ousting of Ben Ali. Civil society is broader here. Demographic pressures although important are less disruptive and social-economic indicators more promising. In this case, concerns regard a deterioration of the polarization between the secular and the religious camps after attempts of creating a common secular front seem to be successful. However, also in this case, the coming out from a condition of economic crisis will prove to be the most important factor for the achievement of the transition. Maybe the geographical distance from the Middle-East and its complex geopolitical situation, particularly after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, will help the Maghreb to stabilize.

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