

Department of Political Science
Master's Degree in International Relations

Chair of Comparative History of Political Systems

**Between Collapse and Continuity: Authoritarian
Resilience in the Shadow of the Arab Spring**

Professor Rosario Forlenza

SUPERVISOR

Professor Michele Petrone

CO-SUPERVISOR

Giorgia Polidori

CANDIDATE
ID No. 654692

Academic Year 2024/2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	4
CHAPTER 1.....	8
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES	8
1.1 Defining Authoritarianism and Resilience	8
1.2 Theories on Democratic Failure and Authoritarian Persistence	11
1.2.1 <i>Historical Institutionalism and Path Dependency</i>	11
1.2.2 <i>Elite Theory and Political Survival</i>	13
1.2.3 <i>Digital Authoritarianism and the Reconfiguration of Control</i>	15
1.3 Historical Patterns of Revolution and Counter-Revolution	17
1.3.1 <i>The Role of Ideology</i>	18
1.4 The Emotional Dimension of Political Crises	20
1.4.1 <i>Fear as a Political Instrument</i>	20
1.4.2 <i>Fatigue and the Decline of Revolutionary Enthusiasm</i>	21
1.4.3 <i>Authoritarian Nostalgia and the Psychological Reinterpretation of the Past</i>	22
CHAPTER 2.....	25
From Uprising to Authoritarian Reinvention: Strategies of Survival in Egypt and Tunisia	25
2.1 Initial Responses to the Arab Uprisings (2011-2013).....	25
2.1.1 <i>The Logic of Authoritarian Crisis Management</i>	25
2.1.2 <i>Strategic Calculations: Why Some Regimes Repressed and Others Conceded</i> ...	27
2.1.3 <i>Egypt's Trajectory: Containing the Opposition, Navigating Uncertainty</i>	29
2.1.4 <i>Tunisia's Trajectory: Democratic Transition and Early Challenges</i>	32
2.2 Mechanisms of Authoritarian Reinvention (2013-present).....	34
2.2.1 <i>Repressive Adaptation: Mass Arrests, Legal Constraints, and Political Co-optation</i>	34
2.2.2 <i>Technological and Informational Control: Digital Surveillance, Media Manipulation, and Online Propaganda</i>	36
2.2.3 <i>Ideological Reinvention: Nationalism, Populism, and State Narratives</i>	39
2.3 Rethinking the Aftermath: Between Reinvention and Political Legacy.....	41
2.3.1 <i>The Afterlife of Transition: Governing with the Legacy of the Past</i>	42
CHAPTER 3.....	45
GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS	45
3.1 Democratization under Threat: Regional and Global Lessons	45

3.2	Scenarios for Egypt, Tunisia, and Beyond	49
3.3	Authoritarianism 2.0: Challenges in the Post-2020 Phase	53
3.3.1	<i>COVID-19 and the Normalization of Emergency Powers</i>	53
3.3.2	<i>Artificial Intelligence and Predictive Control</i>	56
3.3.3	<i>Climate Crisis and the Securitization of Ecology</i>	58
3.4	War, Authoritarianism, and the Politics of Distraction	61
CONCLUSION		65
BIBLIOGRAPHY		69

INTRODUCTION

The uprisings that swept through the Middle East and North Africa starting in 2010-2011 were initially interpreted as a moment of historical turning point, capable of interrupting a long season of authoritarianism and starting a process of democratization that until then had been considered unlikely in the region. Those mobilizations, soon known as the “Arab Spring”, originated in Tunisia with the self-immolation of the young street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi and spread rapidly to countries characterized by established authoritarian regimes, such as Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain. Millions took to the streets to challenge governments perceived as corrupt, repressive, and incapable of ensuring social dignity, job opportunities, and political representation. For those unfamiliar with these events, the Arab Spring can be defined as a series of diverse but united popular protests demanding social justice, an end to repression, respect for civil rights, and greater political participation. While not a unified or coordinated movement, it was often interpreted as an expression of a cross-cutting demand for change, fueled by structural factors such as youth unemployment, growing inequality, crises in clientelistic systems, and the spread of social media as tools of political mobilization.

In public and academic discourse in the early years after 2011, such uprisings were frequently framed as the beginning of a “third wave” of democratization in the MENA region. However, more than a decade later, that optimism appears largely diminished. While it is true that some authoritarian regimes collapsed rapidly, it is equally true that the majority of countries involved have not undertaken a stable democratic transition. In many cases, the outcome of the riots was a reorganization of authoritarian power, sometimes more repressive than the previous one. Civil wars, coups, populist drifts, and new forms of control have progressively replaced initial hopes, calling into questions the assumption that mass mobilization itself constitutes a sufficient condition for democratization. This gap between expectations and results represents the starting point of this research.

The thesis fits in this debate and aims to analyse not the failure of revolts in a normative sense, but the capacity of authoritarian regimes to adapt and survive in the

post-Arab Spring context. In particular, attention is paid to the concept of “authoritarian resilience”, understood as the set of strategies, practices, and transformations through which non-democratic political systems manage to overcome phases of deep crisis without collapsing, instead renewing their mechanisms of control and legitimacy. The underlying assumption is that authoritarianism should not be conceived as a rigid or static structure, destined to collapse in the face of popular pressure, but as a dynamic form of power, capable of learning from experience, reorganizing, and reinventing itself.

Based on this, the work unfolds along a path divided into three complementary analytical chapters. The first chapter presents the conceptual and theoretical framework, with particular emphasis on the concepts of authoritarianism and resilience, as well as key perspectives such as historical constitutionalism, elite theory, digital authoritarianism, and the emotional aspect of political crises. The second chapter is focused on the comparative analysis of the cases of Egypt and Tunisia, examining how different types of authoritarian regimes responded to the Arab uprisings and how processes of survival and reinvention unfolded over time. In the third and last chapter, the case studies are situated within a broader regional and global framework, reflecting upon the long-term political legacy of the Arab Spring and the implications of authoritarian resilience for contemporary debates on democratization.

The choice to focus on two central case studies, Egypt and Tunisia, is not random. Both countries were protagonists of the early stages of the Arab Spring and saw the fall of the leaders who had been in power for decades. At the same time, they followed different political trajectories: Egypt became emblematic of a rapid and violent authoritarian restoration, culminating in the return of the military to power with Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, while Tunisia was long considered the only partial democratic “success” in the region, before experiencing, starting in 2021, a progressive concentration of power in the hands of President Kais Saied. Analysing these two paths allows us to grasp not only the differences but also the convergences

in the mechanisms of authoritarian survival, showing how resilience can take different forms depending on the institutional context, the role of elites, and available resources.

The thesis adopts a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, drawing on political science and comparative history. The goal is not to provide a chronicle of events, but to identify the profound logics that made the reconfiguration of authoritarian power possible after 2011. Why did such countries, in the aftermath of the 2011 revolts, experience the persistence of authoritarian rule rather than sustained processes of democratization? To this end, several theoretical perspectives are integrated: historical institutionalism, which highlights the weight of institutional legacies and long-term paths; elite theory, which highlights the crucial role of power coalitions and co-optation mechanisms; the analysis of counter-revolutionism, useful for understanding how forces interested in maintaining the status quo react to revolutionary phases; and, finally, the concept of digital authoritarianism, which allows to analyse the use of new technologies as tools for surveillance, repression and consensus manipulation.

A further distinctive element of this work is the focus on the ideological and emotional dimension of politics. In addition to material coercion, contemporary authoritarian regimes make extensive use of narratives that reinterpret the past, redefine the meaning of revolution, and mobilize collective emotions such as fear, exhaustion, and nostalgia. In Egypt, the return to authoritarianism has been justified through a security discourse that associates pluralism with chaos and presents military power as the only guarantee of survival. In Tunisia, authoritarian drift has taken a more gradualist and legalistic form, based on a populist rhetoric that pits the “people” against a political elite portrayed as corrupt and inefficient. In both cases, the legitimization of power passes not only through repression, but also through the construction of a political imaginary that makes authoritarianism acceptable, if not desirable, in the eyes of part of the population.

The research argues that the post-2011 period can be interpreted as a liminal phase, characterized by uncertainty, institutional fluidity, and competition between alternative trajectories. In this transitional space, neither fully authoritarianism nor

democratic, regimes have been able to experiment with new control strategies, exploiting the weakness of emerging institutions and the fragmentation of the opposition. Far from being a simple restoration of the past, the authoritarianism that emerged after the Arab Spring appears as renewed, more sophisticated form, capable of combining traditional tools of repression with modern practices of governance, selective legality, and digital control.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to contribute to the debate on democratization and its limitations by showing how the 2011 uprisings did not simply “fail”, but triggered complex processes of political transformation whose outcomes were neither linear nor predetermined. Understanding authoritarian resilience in Egypt and Tunisia means, more generally, questioning the nature of power in the contemporary world and the factors that hinder the construction of truly inclusive political systems. The analysis of the case studies does not claim to offer definitive answers, but rather aspires to provide interpretative tools useful for understanding post-revolutionary dynamics in the Arab world and beyond, highlighting how, in the confrontation between change and continuity, authoritarianism has demonstrated an often underestimated capacity of adaption.

CHAPTER 1

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The persistence of authoritarian systems in the MENA region following the Arab uprisings has been the focus of much scholarly debate. The initial optimism of 2011 seemed to suggest that the region was moving towards democratization, but the years that followed revealed a surprising and remarkable adaptability of authoritarianism. Rather than perceiving these regimes as passive or as bound to fail under some form of stress, more recent scholarship underscores the extent to which authoritarian leaders have changed their governmental style for both internal and external pressures.

In other words, a significant point to learn from authoritarianism is that such dictatorships are not monolithic; they evolve and change with the passage of time, elite manipulation, and technological improvements. Although the 2011 Arab events offered a unique opportunity for disruption, their fallout confirmed that authoritarian structures have strong solid institutional foundations that cannot be overturned by mere public mobilization. This chapter, seeking to deconstruct these frameworks and stressing the variables that contribute to their longevity, lays out the conceptual and theoretical requirements to understand the forms and dynamics of post-2011 authoritarianism in Egypt and Tunisia. By drawing on key theoretical perspectives, it seeks to outline the mechanisms that will be examined in greater depth in the subsequent chapters.

1.1 Defining Authoritarianism and Resilience

To comprehend the tenacity of authoritarian governments in the post-Arab Spring age, it is necessary to first establish the main notions that will underpin this research. The first notion is authoritarianism which, at its core, is a form of government characterized by limited political plurality, a lack of democratic accountability, and considerable restrictions on civil freedoms. Linz (2000) defines authoritarian regimes as those that sustain power by repression, patronage, and institutional manipulation rather than true and genuine democratic legitimacy. Building on this perspective, authoritarian rule has historically relied on a combination of coercion, elite co-optation, and economic distribution to maintain stability (Brownlee et al., 2015).

Still, authoritarianism is not a fixed model: it can range from harsh authoritarian regimes like military dictatorships or absolute monarchs to hybrid authoritarian systems that combine aspects of democratic government with stringent elite control (Geddes et al., 2018). More specifically, separating authoritarian regimes into three primary subtypes—personalist, military, and single-party regimes—is a helpful method to categorize them (Geddes, 2003). Personalist governments, like Saddam Hussein’s in Iraq or Muammar Gaddafi’s in Libya, concentrate power around a single person and frequently erode institutions to resist internal enemies. Military regimes, such as Egypt’s after 2013, are guided by armed forces and use national security and stability narratives to defend their authority. Single-party nations, like Ba’athist Syria, retain power through established party dominance, thus guaranteeing elite cohesion. In essence, each form of authoritarianism represents an obstacle for democratization: military and single-party systems typically endure longer by coopting elites and managing transitions, while personalist ones fall apart more violently since they lack power-sharing mechanisms (Geddes, 2003).

Beyond such structural differences, these administrations’ capacity to portray themselves as stable alternatives to anarchy or extremism is what usually serves to bolster their survival, and that is exactly the successful strategy proven in Egypt and Tunisia during 2011. Broadly speaking, this was also the case in other countries, such as Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union, where Vladimir Putin based his legitimacy on the idea that the turbulent 1990s demonstrated that liberal democracy was inappropriate for Russian society (Kallmer, 2023). Putin used the same mythic framework that Sisi and Saied later employed in their respective nations when he positioned himself as the stabilizing force behind Russia’s post-Soviet “democratic failure”.

The second important concept to deepen is resilience, which, in the context of authoritarian regimes, refers to their ability to weather political crises, adapt to social and economic challenges, and rearrange their strategy for maintaining power. Unlike rigid dictatorships, which collapse under strain, resilient authoritarian institutions adapt to internal and external threats (Ould Mohamedou, 2017). Such adaptability

may take many forms: through constitutional tampering, economic restructuring that counteract dissent, or managed openings that pose the illusion of liberalization while deepening centralized power.

An essential concept to explore in comprehending the enduring nature of authoritarianism is liminality, a concept originally introduced by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in 1909 and later expanded by Victor Turner in 1969. Liminality, according to Van Gennep's research on rites of passage, is the intermediate phase of a three-stage process that includes *separation*, *transition* (liminal period), and *incorporation* (Chakraborty, n.d.). Individuals or societies separate from established structures during the first phase, reside in a suspended, ambiguous space during the second phase, and then reintegrate into a new or altered social order during the last phase. In this regard, Turner (1969) stated that liminal periods are characterized by confusion, ambiguity, and openness. Scholars like Harald Wydra (2015) have improved on this idea by depicting political transitions themselves as liminal spaces in which uncertainty dominates, leaving them susceptible to an authoritarian comeback. Such condition gives regimes the chance to strategically adapt and regain power, frequently in the name of democratization. In post-revolutionary contexts such as Egypt and Tunisia, where the overthrow of long-standing autocrats in 2011 signaled a rupture (separation) from the previous order, this viewpoint is particularly pertinent. However, rather than resulting in stable democracies, these nations continued to exist in a protracted liminal state, where insecurity, weakened institutions, and disputed legitimacy allowed new or old autocratic leaders to reorganize power in their favor.

O'Donnell and Schmitter (2013) add remarkably to the literature on liminality with their discussion of how transitions from authoritarian rule are almost never linear. Their analysis points out that regime collapse does not always result in democratization; rather, competing forces of reform and counter-revolution frequently define transitional periods. They contend that when transitions are not complete and elements of the previous regime still influence the new political system, "uncertain democracies" arise. Thus, applying the concept of liminality helps us to catch why

authoritarian resilience can arise exactly when democratization appears to be imminent, as well as the fluid and reversible side of political change.

Additionally, Thomassen (2014) argues that societies go through a “crisis of legitimacy”, during which no governing structure is universally accepted. Because uncertainty stimulates a desire for stability and order, such crisis opens the door for authoritarian restoration. In Egypt, Mohamed Morsi’s brief presidency served as an example of this phenomenon, since some segments of society welcomed military intervention as a way to restore order in an atmosphere of political polarization and economic unrest. In Tunisia, widespread frustration with post-revolutionary governance has enabled democratic backsliding, allowing Saied to defend his consolidation of power as a remedy for institutional dysfunction.

Ultimately, the examination of authoritarian resilience via the liminal perspective suggests that transitions are not simply times of turmoil but also open-minded moments of redefinition—times defined by crisis, innovation, and conflicting futures. Although authoritarian rebirth can undoubtedly be by these circumstances, as demonstrated by our case studies, this result is not a given. In essence, from a liminal point of view, the Arab protests are not seen as merely failed revolutions, but rather as catalytic events that opened a range of potential political trajectories, among which authoritarian consolidation, despite being prevalent, was only one of several paths.

1.2 Theories on Democratic Failure and Authoritarian Persistence

Scholars have developed several frameworks to account for the endurance of authoritarianism in the face of broad demands for political change. Three main approaches shed light on this phenomenon: historical institutionalism, elite theory, and the emerging concept of digital authoritarianism. Each of them clears up how MENA dictatorships have persevered, adjusted, and, in many situations, tightened their hold on power in the face of massive obstacles.

1.2.1 Historical Institutionalism and Path Dependency

Historical institutionalism holds that political regimes are shaped by path-dependence processes and can resist to quick change. Under this perspective, institutional choices in the past limit present and future political options (Peter et al., 2005). In MENA, authoritarianism is not an isolated anomaly; rather, it is the outcome of decades, if not centuries, of institutional development involving military domination, colonial legacies, and rentier economies, hence strengthening a political culture resistant to democracy (Lynch, 2016). In essence, these strongly ingrained patterns have made sure that, even when leaders are overthrown, the underlying power mechanisms endure, usually adjusting to new conditions while preserving the same basic authoritarian dynamics.

One of the core assumptions of historical institutionalism is the idea of “critical junctures”: moments of intense political upheavals that can reinforce or redirect existing trajectories of institutions (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). Although the 2011 Arab upheavals were viewed as such a juncture, authoritarian governments were reorganized as a result of them rather than enduring democratization. One example that demonstrates how pre-existing power structures influence post-revolutionary results is Egypt, where the military, which had long held enormous authority, took advantage of the revolution to retake control (Bellin, 2012). Similar to this, Ben Ali's regime's lasting impact limited Tunisia's early democratic advancements since important institutions like the court, bureaucracy, and security apparatus persisted (ISPI, 2021). Thus, under President Kais Saied, who benefited from institutional flaws and popular discontent to solidify his power, this institutional continuity made it possible the return of authoritarian behaviours.

Historical institutionalism further clarifies the continuation of authoritarianism by means of institutional inertia's tenacity: once institutions are set up, they usually tend to oppose significant transformation (McLoughlin et al., 2024). That is why institutions shaped by authoritarian control stayed firmly rooted in both Egypt and Tunisia, therefore impeding a democratic transition. This “institutional stickiness” implies that without an essential renewal of these permanent institutional systems, even crises or upsetting events are unlikely to result in substantial shifts.

In a nutshell, path dependence and historical institutionalism taken together help to explain why authoritarianism in these countries has been so tenacious. Deeply embedded institutional frameworks formed by a history of military supremacy, colonial legacies, and rentier economies have guaranteed that authoritarian rule stays strong, adjusting to political changes without fundamentally altering the underlying processes of control. Illustrating why democratic attempts in the post-2011 period encouraged major structural obstacles that finally resulted in the reassertion of authoritarianism depends on an awareness of these historical occurrences.

1.2.2 Elite Theory and Political Survival

Elite theory offers a vital framework for comprehending how authoritarian governments in the MENA region have survived phases of public mobilization and political instability. At its core, this theory assumes that a small group of people in charge of important institutions – including the military, economy, and security apparatus – concentrates power (ECPS, n.d.).

The ability of elites to build strategic alliances, coopt opposition, and influence institutional structures is just as important to the success of such regimes as repression. According to Gause (2013), elite cohesiveness plays a major role in the endurance of authoritarian rule because when governing elites stay together, they can suppress criticism, crush opposition movements, and hold onto power. On the other hand, fragmentation of the elite opens the door to regime instability or democratization.

Egypt is a power illustration of how political paths are influenced by elite dynamics. The military, which has traditionally controlled the political and economic landscape of the nation, saw Mohammed Morsi's presidency as an open threat to its dominance. Highly regarded military officials responded by planning the 2013 coup that installed Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, supported by important corporate leaders. Because the military-business link in Egypt not only made it easier to restore authoritarian rule but also guaranteed its longevity by controlling state resources and limiting dissent, this incident serves as an example of how elite relationships may affect regime survival (Sayigh, 2019). A similar situation occurred in Tunisia, but with unique

features. When political and corporate figures negotiated power-sharing agreements elite differences initially facilitated create a democratic openness. However, elite interests soon shifted in favour of executive centralization as political unrest and economic stagnation intensified. Instead of being a singular incident, Kais Saied's 2021 power grab was the result of a larger elite-driven realignment that put stability ahead of democratic government (ISPI, 2021).

A central mechanism that supports elite supremacy in authoritarian governments is patronage: the intentional distribution of state resources in an effort to purchase loyalty (Freeland, 2024). This system, which is well-established in many MENA countries, ties economic elites, military leaders, and bureaucrats to the governing regime, making disobedience expensive and restricting the range for domestic opposition. In this regard, Slater (2010) highlights how clientelist network are a barrier to democratization because they make sure that those with the greatest authority are committed to the regime maintenance. To give an example, the military's vast economic empire in Egypt, which includes sectors like agriculture and construction, provides strong incentives for elite loyalty (Sayigh, 2019). Since losing power would mean giving up huge economic advantages, any democratic transition that challenges this patronage system is met with opposition. Similar trends of economic elite consolidation have been observed in Tunisia, despite the country's historical lack of military influence. Business leaders who had previously opposed Ben Ali's government quickly adjusted to the post-revolutionary environment and used their popularity to shape the political course of the nation. Many of these elites favoured Saied's centralization of power either directly or implicitly when democratic governance no longer served their interests (Bellin, 2012).

In addition to controlling the economy, authoritarian elites have proven extremely flexible in maintaining their hold on power. Selective co-optation of opposition figures is a popular tactic used to incorporate them into the regime and undermine their capacity to question the status quo (Dobrev et al., 2024). Additionally, another strategy is controlled political liberalization, in which elite supremacy is strengthened through fragile reforms that give the appearance of pluralism (Gandhi &

Lust-Okar, 2009). Both Egypt and Tunisia have experienced this dynamic, with regimes allowing a certain amount of political disagreement while taking decisive action to eliminate any significant obstacles to their rule.

In essence, the combined effect of patronage, institutional manipulation, and elite unity explains why authoritarianism has endured in these states even during notable periods of political unrest. Therefore, such dynamic regimes have changed in response to shifting circumstances, proving that elite adaptation and coercion are equally important for dictatorships to survive in the post-2011 era.

1.2.3 Digital Authoritarianism and the Reconfiguration of Control

The rise of digital authoritarianism is arguably the most important trend in modern authoritarian governance. Indeed, in addition to transforming governance structures globally, the emergence of digital technologies has given repressive governments new methods of monitoring, controlling, and stifling dissent. Digital authoritarianism, which enables governments to extend their control beyond conventional coercive mechanisms, has become a key tactic for regime resilience in Egypt and Tunisia since 2011. Though there were early hopes that digital platforms would have helped civil society and democratic mobilization during the Arab Spring, authoritarian actors rapidly adapted and leveraged these same tools for repression, disinformation, and surveillance (Mohamedou, 2017).

In Egypt, for instance, the state has set up a massive digital surveillance network to keep an eye on opposition leaders, journalists, and activists. The regime has established cyber-monitoring procedures under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's direction, investing in data analytics and artificial intelligence-powered vigilance tools to monitor dissatisfaction. Based on reports, security personnel regularly break into encrypted messaging apps, catch private conversations, and use geolocation information to arrest protesters before they act (Freedom House, 2022). Simultaneously, the Egyptian government has reinforced laws pertaining to digital spaces by passing extensive cybersecurity legislation that makes it illegal criticizing the authorities online. In particular, the 2018 Cybercrime Law gives leaders broad

authority to shut down websites and bring criminal charges against people for unclear offenses like “spreading false information” (Shahbaz, 2018). Thus, these legal instruments, when paired with advanced surveillance tools, have successfully turned the internet into an expansion of state control.

Tunisia has also witnessed a reorganization of digital governance that facilitate executive centralization. Despite the country once being a shining example of post-revolutionary digital openness, online repression has grown in line with Kais Saied’s consolidation of power. Saied employed emergency procedures in 2021 to close media outlets connected to the opposition and increase government oversight of online speech (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2022). This change is indicative of a larger pattern where autocratic leaders use digital tools for narrative control as well as surveillance. Through the implementation of bot networks, state-sponsored disinformation campaigns have been used to discredit critics and influence public opinion in favour of authoritarian policies. Also, recent studies have revealed that social media algorithms are routinely utilized to silence dissenting voices and amplify pro-regime propaganda (Berggruen Institute et al., 2023).

Furthermore, it is noteworthy to underline that authoritarian regimes in the MENA area have adopted digital authoritarianism not only for censorship and surveillance, but also as a means of informational and psychological warfare. They impact public perception, undermine confidence in independent journalism, and promote the legitimacy of the regime by regulating digital content. In Egypt, the government has co-opted mainstream sites and social media influencers to advance pro-regime narratives and paint conflicting figures as terrorists or foreign agents (Fekri, 2020). Meanwhile, in Tunisia, online platforms have been abused as weapons to stifle investigative reporting and weaken political opponents (Morayef, 2024).

In summary, digital repression functions through more covert but widespread strategies than traditional coercion, enabling hybrid regimes to take advantage of the accessibility of online spaces while also supervising and manipulating them.

1.3 Historical Patterns of Revolution and Counter-Revolution

For a long time, revolutions have been viewed as ruptures – episodes of public mobilization that aim for fundamental political change and challenge established power structures. However, history reveals that notable counter-revolutionary reactions frequently follow revolutions, altering political paths in ways that support or even strengthen authoritarian governance. Indeed, from the Arab uprisings to the French Revolution, counter-revolutions have been the deciding factor in determining whether moments of political turbulence lead to long-term systemic change or a return to autocracy (Goldstone, 2011).

Patterns observed in previous revolutions were reflected in the 2011 Arab upheavals, as coordinated counter-revolutionary operations followed initial waves of public mobilization. At first, for instance, Hosni Mubarak's overthrow in Egypt was celebrated as a win for democratic goals. But only two years later, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi came to power amid a military-led counter-revolution supported by political elites and sections of the populace fed up with the post-Mubarak transition (Clarke, 2023). As a consequence, this led to the restoration of authoritarian rule. Similar processes have also occurred in past historical instances, where well-coordinated counter-revolutionary forces with a stake in upholding the status quo frequently reverse early revolutionary momentum (Hannoum, 2011). Arendt (1963) noted in her analysis of revolutions that effective counter-revolutions frequently mask their comeback to authoritarian rule under the pretext of reestablishing national unity, stability, or even the revolution's initial objectives. The rhetoric of order and national salvation played a crucial role in defending counter-revolutionary actions in both Egypt and Tunisia. Nevertheless, in Tunisia the counter-revolutionary trend has taken a more progressive form. At first glance, the country seemed to be the sole success story of the Arab revolts, as a functional democracy emerged from the toppling of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. Nevertheless, years of political uncertainty, economic crises, and elite disintegration made it easier for President Kais Saied to concentrate the power in his hands, raising worries about the future of Tunisia's democratic experiment. Therefore, the concept that counter-revolutions can arise through gradual changes that

threaten democratic governance from within rather than through sudden takeovers is further supported by Tunisia's gradual deterioration of democratic institutions (Meyer, 2011).

1.3.1 The Role of Ideology

Though frequently overlooked, ideology has been crucial in facilitating the reassertion of authoritarian power following the Arab uprisings, within the broader framework of counter-revolutionary efforts. Ideological narratives have actively influenced how authoritarian regimes have portrayed their reinvention as the fulfilment of the revolutionary moment rather than a betrayal of it, thus far from serving only as a post hoc legitimization. The ruling classes in Egypt and Tunisia used ideology as a framework to reinterpret the 2011 upheavals and create a discourse that made authoritarian resurgence seem both necessary and trustworthy by evoking national unity, order, and ethical renewal.

This process was particularly evident in the ideological reinterpretation that followed the 2013 military takeover in Egypt. The army, led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, positioned its actions as a remedy for the chaos and the apparent sectarianism that came after Mubarak's downfall, depicting itself as the revolution's natural heir and ultimate guardian. Using an effective discursive arsenal encompassing religious extremism, foreign interference, and accusations of terrorism, the Muslim Brotherhood government — once democratically elected — was progressively delegitimized. As Žižek (2012) asserts, revolutions are not only waged with force but also through struggles for meaning. In Egypt, for instance, the people who confused national salvation with authoritarian rule and revolutionary failure with democratic testing firmly prevailed in this conflict over how to interpret the unrest. This discursive shift was supported by a number of institutional and cultural mechanisms; it was not an accident. The story that the military had "rescued" Egypt from collapse was propagated by state-run media, religious organizations such as al-Azhar, and well-known cultural personalities. This type of ideological production consistent with Antonio Gramsci's (1971) theory of passive revolution, which holds that elites mitigate and redirect popular energies in the name of reform in order to maintain

power and avoid structural change. Rather than completely rejecting the revolution, the Sisi regime appropriated its symbols and objectives — prosperity, security, and dignity — and reframed them in a way that made authoritarian preservation a patriotic imperative.

Although the pace and tone of Tunisia's trajectory varied, it shared many fundamental ideological mechanisms. In contrast to Egypt's rapid return to military rule, Tunisia's democratic institutions were eroded ideologically over time. A general feeling of disillusionment spread among the populace as years of political stalemate, economic stagnation, and elite division mounted. By leveraging a populist rhetoric that positioned him as the genuine voice of the people against a corrupt and ineffective party system, President Kais Saied expertly took advantage of this environment. In practice, his rhetoric allowed for an unprecedented concentration of executive power while invoking republican ideals of justice, honesty, and popular sovereignty.

Ideology was crucial in justifying authoritarian drift in this instance as well. In her examination of authoritarian narratives in Syria, Wedeen (2019) points out that ideology shapes moral imaginaries — notifying people what is right, what is feasible, and what is avoidable — rather than just using coercive institutions. Saied was able to undermine democratic norms while preserving the symbolic language of reform because his rhetoric of anti-elitism and constitutional purification struck a chord with a populace tired of post-revolutionary paralysis. Therefore, his slow consolidation of power was portrayed as a necessary step to realize the unfulfilled promises of the revolution rather than as a step backward.

Furthermore, such belief systems were incorporated into digital communication, public education, and legal reforms rather than being limited to speeches and slogans. That is because, as Anderson (1976) observed, ideology in contemporary politics serves as a healing imaginary, providing a sense of historical continuity even during times of drastic institutional change. State actors in both Egypt and Tunisia created national identities that linked political pluralism to anarchy, dissent to treachery, and order to strength. This allowed authoritarian consolidation to

be presented as the rational, even moral, outcome of revolution rather than as its failure.

These ideological tactics also served a preventive purpose by altering public perception and collective memory, which made it harder for competing narratives to surface. The prevailing post-2013 discourse in Egypt linked the Muslim Brotherhood chaos and foreign agendas, delegitimizing both the organization and the concept of democratic pluralism (Brown, 2013). Saied's ideological portrayal of the "corrupt political class" in Tunisia has eroded trust in the party system overall, weakening the institutional foundation for civic participation and opposition. In both instances, ideology has conditioned the limits of political imagination along with justifying repression.

To sum up, these scenarios show that ideology is not a secondary or an optional aspect of authoritarian rule, but rather a key mechanism of its reproduction, enabling regimes to reinterpret the meaning of revolutionary rupture, reroute popular complaints, and define institutional transformation as moral imperatives. As a result, ideological narratives are intricately connected to the larger patterns of authoritarian resilience, actively impacting how societies perceive their political future and comprehend their past, as well as maintaining legitimacy during periods of crisis.

1.4 The Emotional Dimension of Political Crises

After examining the institutional, elite, technological, and ideological mechanisms of authoritarian perseverance, the emotional aspect of political crises is the final theoretical factor worth taking into account. Even though actors and structures have historically been the main focus of political science, emotions are extremely important in determining political outcomes, especially during times of transition. As well as leveraging on institutional adaption and repression, authoritarian regimes also use popular emotions like fear, exhaustion, and longing to preserve their hold on power.

1.4.1 Fear as a Political Instrument

Fear, which political elites can purposefully create or bolster, is perhaps one of the most powerful instruments for authoritarian survival. People frequently tolerate or even promote authoritarian norms out of fear of instability, civil war, or economic collapse. This is particularly noticeable when revolutions result in protracted uncertainty.

As previously noted, Egypt's democratic experiment under Mohamed Morsi following 2011 was marked by severe political division, demonstrations, and economic challenges. The military, led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, took advantage of public anxiety by depicting itself as the sole means that could bring about stability. In essence, the argument surrounding the 2013 military intervention presented authoritarian governance as a necessary evil to keep the nation from devolving into anarchy, similar to what happened in Syria or Libya (Clarke, 2023). In the same way, the Tunisian President Kais Saied defended his 2021 takeover of power by claiming that it was an attempt to "save the nation" from malfunction; he presented his destruction of democratic institutions as a defensive measure rather than a seizure of power by appealing to joint anxieties (Morayef, 2024).

The intentional use of fear supports Wedeen's (2019) contention that authoritarian governments mold not only institutions and laws but also perceptions of risk, thus making unimaginable the alternatives to their command.

1.4.2 Fatigue and the Decline of Revolutionary Enthusiasm

Beyond fear, another major factor contributing to the failure of democratic transitions is political fatigue. Extended periods of uncertainty, economic misery, and broken promises only generate a sense of exhaustion among the population. Mass mobilization, as Tilly (2003) indicates, is hard to maintain eternally, and regimes that provide stability tend to retake legitimacy when enthusiasm decreases, even at the expense of political freedoms.

An appropriate illustration of how fatigue reduces democratic involvement is Tunisia. As the Tunisians faced numerous elections, coalition governments, economic crises, and increasing political fragmentation after the 2011 revolution, they had lost

faith in democratic governance when Saied dissolved Parliament in 2021, especially those outside the urban elite circles (Schäfer, 2015). This explains why, despite their controversy, his actions drew comparatively little public outrage rather than strong opposition.

Once more, post-Soviet Russia saw a similar path. Russians initially welcomed democratic change in the 1990s, but the Yeltsin era's chaotic governance and economic downturn inspired popular discontent (Kallmer, 2023). Many citizens were prepared to give up democratic hopes for stability when Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, promising peace, growth, and a national renaissance.

1.4.3 Authoritarian Nostalgia and the Psychological Reinterpretation of the Past

In post-revolutionary Egypt and Tunisia, authoritarian nostalgia extends beyond a mere longing for past governments. As Svetlana Boym (2001) points out, nostalgia has a dual aspect: it is a memory of what was lost, but also a utopian projection, an effort to use an idealized past to reimagine a safe and respectable future. The author makes a distinction between “reflective nostalgia” which resides in ambivalence and emphasizes longing without the appearance of complete restoration, and “restorative nostalgia”, which seeks to recreate the perceived certainties of the past.

Restorative nostalgia has been a major factor in the revival of authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Tunisia. In Egypt, the memories of the Mubarak era—once linked to oppression and corruption (Brownlee et al., 2015)—were progressively reframed through the lenses of stability and economic predictability, despite his authoritarianism. Similar to this, a growing sense of disillusionment was fueled in Tunisia by the ineffectiveness of post-revolutionary governments, which were marked by elite rivalry, economic stagnation, and division. President Kais Saied capitalized on the desire for a more “disciplined” and controlled political life, thus focusing his discourse on solidarity, anti-corruption, and republican virtue (Schäfer, 2015).

Nostalgia is frequently triggered during perceived cultural dislocation, when people feel detached from recognizable structures and shared narratives, as Teti (2014)

and Prete (1992) contend. In this context of collective disorientation, leaders like Sisi and Saied have positioned themselves as pillars of protection, able to restore cohesive sense of national identity. This shows how nostalgia transforms from a memory into a political tool and an affective tactic that creates continuity in the face of change.

This dynamic also exposes the social foundation required for nostalgia to have political resonance. Invoking the past is not enough; there needs to be a shared emotional willingness to accept that invocation (Głowacka-Grajper, 2018). Marginalized groups, particularly those outside of urban elites circles, are more susceptible to narratives promising a return to order because they frequently perceive political transitions as chaos rather than liberation. Scholars suggest that this psychological readiness can be fostered through symbolic language, national untruths, and media strategies that reinterpret historical meaning.

Importantly, this phenomenon is not unique to Arab world. For instance, a similar process took place in post-Franco Spain, where some segments of the populace, particularly the elderly, expressed a longing for the dictatorship's stability in the face of the unpredictabilities of the democratic transition (Encarnación, 2008). Leaders such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia have also used nostalgia for authoritarian memories to strengthen their hold on power in post-Communist Eastern Europe (Głowacka-Grajper, 2018).

From a psychological standpoint, this reinterpretation of the past can be clarified in part by the “peak-end rule” suggested by Fredrickson and Kahneman (1993): people are more likely to remember the most powerful (peak) moments and the last stage of a past experience rather than its entire intricacy. Therefore, the preceding authoritarian rule is frequently reframed as a period of equilibrium if the post-revolutionary era is linked to troubles.

Based on what have been said thus far, it is now clear that overcoming the belief that large-scale uprisings inevitably result in democratic change is necessary to comprehend why authoritarianism persists and why its survival is not a passive phenomenon but rather an active process of reinvention. Understanding that resilience does not equate to rigidity is equally crucial. In addition to surviving, the

regimes under consideration have adapted, often by embracing democratic rhetoric, exploiting difficulties to cement their hold on power, and using technology to stay in control. This complexity calls into question oversimplified divisions between authoritarian and democratic systems, encouraging us to view them as dynamic and fluid instead. However, it also challenges the extent to which such environments actually allow for opposition and reform: have these regimes managed to firmly establish themselves, or are they merely postponing the inevitable change?

In light of this framework, the following chapter will deeply focus on the situations of Egypt and Tunisia, exploring how these more general dynamics have materialized in two nations that initially experienced comparable revolutionary events but took different routes. Through their paths, we can gain a greater awareness of the circumstances that influence authoritarianism's evolution in the contemporary era as well as its persistence.

CHAPTER 2

From Uprising to Authoritarian Reinvention: Strategies of Survival in Egypt and Tunisia

It is rare for authoritarian regimes to fall apart overnight. They plan, adjust, and frequently reinvent themselves in response to mass uprisings rather than just reacting to them. Regimes throughout the MENA region were pushed into crisis mode by the 2011 Arab upheavals, which compelled them to implement survival tactics that would influence the course of the following years of governance.

In order to reveal the deeper logic of regime survival, this chapter analyses the repressive responses in Egypt and Tunisia, going beyond the simple chronology of events. Instead of seeing 2011 as the “end” of authoritarianism, as started to demonstrate in the previous pages, it examines how it changed, thus showing that regime longevity was an intentional, proactive adaptation process rather than just a reaction.

2.1 Initial Responses to the Arab Uprisings (2011-2013)

The Middle East and North Africa’s (MENA) authoritarian invulnerability was truly tested by the 2011 Arab uprisings. The combination of coercion, patronage, and strictly regulated political domains had allowed the ruling elites to hold onto power for decades. However, the sudden explosion of large-scale demonstrations displayed deep-rooted weaknesses within these systems, forcing them into survival mode. Egypt and Tunisia are two powerful examples of how authoritarian regimes fought to hold onto power, some by using force, others by making strategic concessions and intended elite negotiating, setting the stage for their post-2013 paths.

2.1.1 *The Logic of Authoritarian Crisis Management*

When faced with such widespread demonstrations, authoritarian governments don’t react randomly; instead, they tend to use planned crisis management techniques meant to crush opposition while maintaining essential state structures (Heydemann, 2013). A number of factors influence the choice of strategy, such as the level of elite

fragmentation, the role of external players, the cohesiveness of security forces, and the larger geopolitical environment (Bellin, 2012).

Dictatorships have traditionally employed a mix of coercion, force, and driven reforms to survive political unrest. The Arab upheavals demonstrated how these regimes tried to adjust their tactics in real time, frequently switching between various approaches as the circumstances changed. Some governments, such as those in Syria and Libya, used harsh repression, which led to long-lasting wars (Lynch, 2016). Some, such as Jordan and Morocco, sought to avert revolutionary momentum by implementing limited constitutional reforms (Yom & Gause, 2012). Despite having fallen regimes, Egypt and Tunisia demonstrated two divergent approaches to crisis management that would ultimately influence their political paths after 2013.

In general, authoritarian crisis management follows a triad approach:

- *Repressive Containment*

A distinctive characteristic of authoritarian crisis response is the prompt use of security forces to quell demonstrations, obstruct mobilization, and scare activists (Albrecht & Bishara, 2011). Curfews, mass detentions, and violent repressions are examples of this. In essence, regimes intensify brutality to crush dissent before it obtains popularity when they believe their coercive mechanisms are robust enough. As proven in Egypt and Tunisia, however, extreme violence can occasionally cause problems and encourage increased mobilization (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Ben Ali's downfall was indeed facilitated by the national outrage sparked by the Tunisian security forces' use of live ammunition in December 2010 (Grewal, 2023). Early in 2011, protests in Egypt were met with cruelty as well, which at first discouraged some protesters but eventually inspired widespread opposition repression turned fatal (Ketchley, 2017).

- *Strategic Concessions*

When using force alone is insufficient to crush dissent, regimes leverage political or economic reforms as a strategy. Instead of truly promoting democracy, these concessions—such as willingness for constitutional amendments, financial aid

packages, or leadership changes—are usually intended to fracture opposition movements (Durac, 2015). Once the immediate danger has passed, these reforms are later not being completed. Both Mubarak in Egypt and Ben Ali in Tunisia made last-minute reform attempts, but they were unsuccessful due to their late nature. Concretely, while Ben Ali's vow to permit media freedom and not run for reelection in 2011 came too late to restore his legitimacy, Mubarak's vow to not run for reelection in 2011 did not appease demonstrators (Gelvin, 2015).

- *Elite Bargaining and Realignment*

The military, security, business, and political elites work together to support authoritarian governments. Intra-elite negotiations decide whether the ruling coalition breaks up completely or if a leader is sacrificed to maintain the regime during times of crisis (Slater, 2010). In Tunisia, Ben Ali's downfall was accelerated when the military distanced itself from him. In Egypt, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) determined that Mubarak had turned into a burden and allowed his resignation in order to preserve their institutional domination. As a result, the military played a crucial role in both nations: in Tunisia, it permitted a shift to civilian governance, while in Egypt it reaffirmed its control on the political system, paving the way for Sisi's eventual consolidation of power (Sayigh, 2019).

Therefore, these three mechanisms outlined how authoritarian regimes handled the initial shock of the Arab uprisings. Even though both Egypt and Tunisia experienced the crash of their systems, the ways in which such crisis management techniques transpired in each country influenced their different post-2011 paths.

2.1.2 Strategic Calculations: Why Some Regimes Repressed and Others Conceded

It should not be underestimated that the differing reactions of authoritarian governments to the Arab uprisings were not random; rather, they were influenced by a confluence of institutional, structural, and geopolitical elements. Some governments tried hybrid tactics or made controlled concessions, while others chose to use violent repression. The cohesion of ruling elites, the role of the military, international

pressures, and a regime's assessment of its coercive power all shaped the decision to repress or give in (Alsaadi, 2023). We already know that two different calculations are best illustrated by Egypt and Tunisia: while Tunisia's fragmented elite and weaker security apparatus resulted in a negotiated transitions, Egypt's ruling class alternated between strategic concessions and harsh repression before eventually recovering authoritarian rule (Grewal, 2020).

Key factors in determining how a certain regime responded were the power and unity of its security apparatus. Repression was the default reaction when security forces were closely associated with the regime and had a stake in its ongoing success. Thanks to decades of patronage, Egypt's military and intelligence agencies rapidly shifted their focus from defending Mubarak to guaranteeing their institutional dominance, first by supporting a short-term transition and then by advancing Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's 2013 military coup (Cook, 2011). Conversely, the security forces in Tunisia lacked the same degree of institutional autonomy and commitment to the regime's survival. As a result, the military declined to use force to quell protests, which later forced Ben Ali to leave the country (Barany, 2011).

Another critical determinant was the level of elite harmony or separation. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in Egypt aimed to maintain military supremacy over Mubarak's personal leadership, thus purposefully choosing to leave him in order to keep institutional control and appease protesters (Sayigh, 2019). Yet, as political unrest increased after 2011, military leaders realized that the only way to protect their political and economic interests was returning to direct authoritarian rule, which ultimately led to Morsi's overthrow (Ketchley, 2017). In contrast, elite fragmentation plagued Tunisia. Because of the absence of a robust military foundation, Ben Ali's government depended on a vast police force that was less reliable during emergencies (Anderson, 2011). Consequently, negotiations for a democratic transition were made easier by a such disintegration of Tunisia's ruling elite, which included the departure of important political and business leaders, making full-scale repression intolerable.

Beyond domestic considerations, authoritarian methods of survival were also significantly shaped by geopolitical variables. Knowing they could survive short-term diplomatic censure, regimes with powerful external defenders were more likely to use repression (Lynch, 2016). For instance, Gulf monarchies like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who saw the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood as an existential threat, continued to support the Egyptian military (Hess, 2013). Sisi was able to suppress dissent with a fair amount of immunity thanks to this political and financial support. On the other hand, European actors, especially the EU, actively pushed Tunisian elites toward a negotiated settlement, while Tunisia lacked a similar patron willing to finance a coercive response (Marks, 2015).

Regime tactics were also impacted by the nature of opposition movements. In Egypt, for instance, the opposition was dominated by the well-organized Muslim Brotherhood, viewed as a real vital threat. Crackdowns during the immediate post-Mubarak period and after Morsi's overthrow were indeed justified by this perception (Zollner, 2019). However, in Tunisia, elite talks were a more feasible option because opposition here was more ideologically divided and lacked a single force that could monopolize power (Yerkes & Muasher, 2017).

To put it in a nutshell, the ability of a regime to preserve coercive power, oversee elite cohesion, and negotiate global dynamics ended up determining whether it opted for repression, concessions, or a combination of the two.

2.1.3 *Egypt's Trajectory: Containing the Opposition, Navigating Uncertainty*
Although Egypt has thus far been discussed primarily in general terms of comparison, it is now necessary to look closely at how authoritarianism was carefully reimaged and resurrected following the 2011 upheavals. Indeed, Egypt embodies a startling example of authoritarian recalibration, with elites using revolutionary confusion to put down opposition and reestablish power through a reorganized, military-supported government.

After Mubarak was deposed in 2011, Egypt went through a period of political precariousness during which the military formally handed over power to civilian

leaders but never really left the arena. From the SCAF- managed referendum of March 2011 to the constitutional drafting, the military-led provisional process was intended more as a means of upholding fundamental regime interests than as a means of implementing a democratic transition (Kandil, 2012). Thus, the shift only rearranged the political players around authoritarian institutions, not their destruction.

The election of Mohamed Morsi in June 2012, in response to a narrow triumph in a runoff against a former regime figure, was celebrated as a democratic milestone. However, Morsi's administration was structurally limited from the start because of the military having already secured its prerogatives in accordance with the interim constitutional declaration, the judiciary still being dominated by Mubarak-era officers, and the security apparatus maintaining its independence and openly opposing the Muslim Brotherhood (El-Ghobashy, 2021). As a result, Morsi had to deal with a state apparatus that was not only obstructive, but occasionally also subversive.

It is thus clear that Morsi's presidency was defined by his ever-increasing hostile relationship with both the state institutions and secular opposition groups. The Brotherhood portrayed his November 2012 constitutional declaration, which gave him a momentary immunity from legal oversight, as an essential step to safeguard the revolution, but enemies saw it as a power grab (Beaumont, 2012). Large-scale demonstrations followed, which led to disputes outside the presidential residence. Rather than expanding his coalition, Morsi decided to further distance himself from potential allies among civil society or the revolutionary youth by strengthening his base of support (Brown, 2013).

Nevertheless, the main problem was institutional. The state's oppressive levers were not subject to the Brotherhood's control. People like Mohamed Ibrahim, who had worked under Mubarak and later played a key role in planning the Rabaa massacre, continued to exercise power in the Ministry of Interior. Meanwhile, the military patiently awaited. It kept an eye on the growing dissatisfaction and, the economic decline, and the increasing alienation of the Brotherhood while opening declaring neutrality (Ketchley, 2017b). The military took advantage of the rising popularity of the Tamarod petition campaign in mid-2013. Then, in what was

essentially a planned coup, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi declared Morsi's overthrow on July 3 under the pretence of a popular mandate (BBC News, 2019).

The most severe repression in contemporary Egyptian history occurred during the post-coup era. Human Rights Watch reports that more than 800 people were killed in the August 14, 2013, massacre at Rabaa al-Adawiya (Shakir, 2023), which was a purposeful display of zero tolerance. It marked a change from selective suppression to outright suppression of dissent. Thousands of members and supporters were detained or forced into exile after the Muslim Brotherhood was labelled a terrorist organization and its assets were seized (Roll, 2018). Crucially, repression was not limited to Islamists. Hence, the political sphere that had developed after 2011 was basically erased by targeting liberal journalists, independent NGOs, and secular activists from the April 6 Movement (Kingsley, 2013).

The institutionalization of Egypt's authoritarian restoration is what distinguishes it from other restorations. Military privileges, such as the authority to appoint the defence minister and hold civilians trials in military courts, were firmly established by the 2014 Constitution (Egypt 2014 Constitution - Constitute, n.d.). Civil liberties were further restricted by laws pertaining to protest, NGO registration, and cybercrime. Mass executions in ridiculous trials turned the courts into a weapon of political retaliation. At the international level, the regime presented itself as a regional stabilizer and counterterrorism ally. Despite rhetorical criticism, Western states largely normalized relations, putting energy deals, migration control, and security ahead of human rights issues (Yom & Gause, 2012).

Therefore, Egypt's post-2011 trajectory demonstrates a particular logic of authoritarian crisis management based on institutional control, the intentional destruction of opposition, and the development of external assistance. Egypt reveals how a regime can rebuild authoritarian rule under the guise of popular mandate and counterterrorism through deliberate repression and manipulation of uncertainty. This reorganization was not a coincidence; rather, it was the outcome of coordinated efforts of international, military, security, and judicial players seeking to restore an order that had been briefly upset in 2011.

2.1.4 Tunisia's Trajectory: Democratic Transition and Early Challenges

If Egyptian path showed how authoritarianism could rapidly re-emerge with a re-oriented security apparatus, Tunisia provided a unique and distinct alternative. Having only quickly discussed about Tunisia so far, it is now necessary a greater understanding of how the regime changed in response to pressure and how institutional postures, elite divisions, and calculated concessions made room for a previously unheard-of democratic experiment in the region. The security forces in Tunisia, unlike Egypt, did not use widespread violence to put down the protests. During the pivotal days of January 2011, the army, which was relatively independent and professionally isolated from political interference, declined to support Ben Ali, hurrying his exile (Barany, 2011). A political void was thus created because of this action, but at the same time it presented a rare chance for a negotiated transition.

Tunisia faced institutional and structural difficulties after the uprising. However, the readiness of important political players to communicate and reach a compromise was what put Tunisia on a different route. A key turning point was the emergence of the moderate Islamist party Ennahda as a major force in the Constituent Assembly (Ghannouchi, 2016). In contrast to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Ennahda took a cooperative stance, avoiding control over the transition process, even if it meant temporarily leaving office in 2013 due to growing polarization (Hamid, 2014). Thus, in order to preserve the legitimacy of the transition and prevent a descent into civil war, this strategic withdrawal was a planned reaction.

This mindset was a reflection of a more general realization that the power dynamics were too unstable to hazard dominance. The political elites of Tunisia understood that power-sharing was more effective than polarization due to institutional fragility, unlike other post-authoritarian environments where provisional competition rapidly degenerated into zero-sum rivalries. Also, for both Ennahda and secular actors, the recollection of Algeria's civil war in the 1990s acted as a warning, urging a more cautious and cooperative approach. Parties relied on unofficial channels and backroom negotiations, putting process ahead of immediate gains, instead of letting political hostility turn into institutional paralysis or brutal repression.

In Tunisia, the impact of elite fragmentation was different. Although there were clear political differences, the National Dialogue Quartet was able to be formed because of common concerns about destabilization and a stronger culture of civil society involvement (Stephen, 2017), which included groups like the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT). The roadmap that eventually resulted in a technocratic government and the 2014 Constitution was mediated in large part by this coalition. However, the path chosen was not perfectly linear or impervious to obstacles: the transition's vulnerability was hence revealed in 2013 when opposition leaders Mohamed Brahmi and Chokri Belaid were assassinated, setting off a serious political crisis (Bellin, 2013). What is important here is the fact that such moments were used to further rounds of negotiations, strengthening the emerging democratic culture, rather than being leveraged by the security apparatus to regain control.

Importantly, the transitional process gave institutional innovation equal weight with inclusion. In addition to gender equality and civil liberties, the new Constitution established a semi-parliamentary system designed to restrain executive power (Al-Ali & Romdhane, 2014). Even though these systems were the result of extensive discussion and compromise, they also represented the anxiety associated with a return to one-man rule. Still, the same disjointed institutional structure that prevented an authoritarian return in the short run would subsequently fuel ongoing governance stagnation.

Socioeconomic complaints and corruption continued long after the initial democratic achievement. Networks of patronage connected to the previous regime were progressively re-integrated into the changing state structures as the governments that followed 2011 failed to implement significant economic reforms (Yerkes & Muasher, 2017). These factors showed that even if the political transition seemed to have gone well on the surface, more extensive institutional reforms were still lacking.

Additionally, Tunisia's model was not immune to authoritarian reversals, as evidenced by the persistence of unreformed police institutions and a judiciary vulnerable to political meddling. The state continued to be entangled with deeply rooted desires, especially in outlying areas where economic marginalization

encouraged disenchantment toward the post-revolution order. Future frustration was clearly made possible by this gap between socioeconomic marginalization and formal political inclusion.

All things considered, Tunisia's history shows that, under certain circumstances, elite negotiating, civil society pressure, and regime concessions can pave the way for a democratic transition. Political restraint and elite compromise, which turned out to be Tunisia's strength and ultimate vulnerability, were more responsible for the initial transition's success than an institutional revamp.

2.2 Mechanisms of Authoritarian Reinvention (2013-present)

Although this chapter's first section concentrated on the elite reactions and transitional paths that characterized the immediate post-2011 environment, this section shifts to the long-term processes by which authoritarianism has not only reappeared but also evolved. Between 2013 and the present, both regimes in Egypt and Tunisia have used increasingly complex methods to solidify their power, not simply going back to earlier authoritarian models, but adjusting them to fit new sociopolitical and technological realities. In other words, this part investigates how authoritarianism changed into a more adaptable and robust form that can endure in a post-revolutionary, post-truth era by comparing and contrasting these mechanisms.

2.2.1 Repressive Adaptation: Mass Arrests, Legal Constraints, and Political Co-optation

From the improvised and reactive tactics used in the early years of the demonstrations to more codified and legally defined mechanisms, oppressive regimes in Egypt and Tunisia have drastically altered their repression approaches since 2013. This development is indicative of a more general adaptation to authoritarianism: the normalization of control. Instead of merely depending on military force or overt acts of violence, regimes have increasingly been incorporating repression into the discourse of security, anti-terrorism, and legality. Political co-optation was also used selectively, not to promote pluralism but to neutralize and split opposition.

This metamorphosis in Egypt started almost immediately after the July 2013 military takeover (Wahba, 2024). The apparent transitional ambiguity came to an end with the Rabaa al-Adawiya massacre, and a new authoritarian order was established. Although this violent break is still symbolic, what transpired was a legal engineering process that reframed repression as a governance issue. Under the false pretence of public order, officials were able to criminalize disagreement by introducing broad and ambiguous definitions of “threats to national security” in the anti-protest law of 2013 and the anti-terrorism law of 2015 (Hassib & Shires, 2021). Consequently, the detention of thousands of political prisoners, involving not only Muslim Brotherhood members but also secular activists, journalists, and lawyers, has frequently been justified by these laws.

The 2019 NGO law was a pillar of this legalist shift; it replaced a more overtly harsh version from 2017 while keeping some many of the same oppressive features. Even if the new law was framed as a reaction to pressure from around the world, it still strictly regulated civil society operations, particularly those involving foreign funding and registration (Hofmann, 2021). This represents a more advanced kind of authoritarianism that hides coercion behind bureaucratic rationality, as repression was not reversed but rather reframed in technocratic terms. Additionally, courts were used more and more as tools: arbitrary sentencing, mass examinations, and the use of military tribunals for civilians made it difficult to distinguish between political retaliation and lawfulness (Tonstad, 2021).

Since 2021, Tunisia has pursued its own course of repressive adaptation, though without the same degree of explicit repression until more recently. A wave of detentions concerning judges, journalists, and union leaders has coincided with President Kais Saied’s extraordinary measures, which include the suspension of parliament, the dissolution of the Supreme Judicial Council, and the consolidation of executive power (el-Ansary, 2025). Saied’s Tunisia has shifted toward a more unilateral form of governance, in contrast to the early post-revolutionary years when repression was restrained by elite negotiation and legal ambiguity. A worrying

institutional change is the growing use of military courts for investigating civilians, especially in politically delicate cases (International Commission of Jurists, 2023).

Similar to Egypt, Tunisia frequently uses national sovereignty and the battle against treason or corruption as justifications for its oppressive policies. Through employing this discursive technique, the regime is able to portray brutality as a patriotic or moral obligation rather than a political instrument. By using what some academics refer to as “rule of law” —not the lack of legal order, but its manipulation to further authoritarian goals (Ginsburg & Moustafa, 2008) — authoritarian figures have learned to adjust to international expectations in both situations.

The calculated application of political co-optation is equally significant. The post-2013 government in Egypt fostered media personalities and ostensibly independent parties who were prepared to back the narrative of counterterrorism and national unity. In strictly regulated parliamentary settings, a few opposition leaders were granted restricted platforms, creating the impression of pluralism while excluding any genuine dissent (Hoffman, 2021). This reasoning has been replicated in Tunisia under Saied, where he has alienated traditional parties and strengthened his base through a new, specially designed constitutional referendum in 2022 that undermined checks and balances (International Commission of Jurists, 2023), while simultaneously claiming to restore the will of the people.

Thus, these trends highlight a larger authoritarian rebirth in which repression is now part of the state’s routine operations rather than a rare occurrence. Laws are used to implement it, crisis narratives are used to justify it, and courts and bureaucracies are used to put it into effect. This is how the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia after 2013 have progressed beyond the mere survival. They could establish a system of governance in which political fragmentation, legality, and coercion combine to stifle dissent and maintain centralized authority.

2.2.2 Technological and Informational Control: Digital Surveillance, Media Manipulation, and Online Propaganda

Authorities in Egypt and Tunisia have realized more and more in the years since 2013 that preserving control over the digital and informational environment is essential to their survival rather than serving as a supplementary instrument of governance. Early Arab Uprisings demonstrated the effectiveness of viral dissent and online mobilization. Both regimes responded by creating increasingly complex digital repression and narrative engineering strategies, implementing infrastructures, technologies, and discursive frames that were intended to influence the informational ecosystem rather than just censor opposition.

Following the defeat of opposition on the streets, Egypt saw a less well-publicized but no less significant conflict over the digital realm. After 2013, internet freedom, which had already been threatened in the last years of Mubarak's ruling, quickly declined. Thanks to the help of foreign companies, the government increased its surveillance capabilities, including contracts for "deep packet inspection" technologies (Ben-Hassine, 2017) that could monitor user activity across platforms. Captures under broad anti-terror and cybercrime laws have risen in response to social media posts judged critical towards the government. Amal Fathy, an activist who was arrested in 2018 after posting a Facebook video denouncing sexual harassment and the poor performance of public services (Amnesty International, 2018), is one particularly notable example. Even though she had no organization connection, she was sentenced under anti-terrorism charges, which illustrates how ordinary dissent is redesigned as a threat to national security.

What distinguishes this phase is not just censorship, but the weaponization of information infrastructure. The purpose of regime-controlled media, many of which are owned or run by the intelligence services, has been to silence dissenting opinions and create a narrative of secularization, national cohesion, and mistrust of outside influence. The creation of United Media Services in 2016, a conglomerate owned by GIS, resulted in the central editorial control of dozens of previously autonomous newspapers and television channels (RSF, 2022). Because of this media capture, the regime was able to suppress antagonistic narratives and flood political discourse with carefully chosen messages. At the same time, anonymous cyber units affiliated with

the government used social media to target critics with planned trolling campaigns and spread pro-regime material across hashtags (DFRLab, 2023).

During the first few years after the revolution, Tunisia's information environment remained relatively pluralistic. Yet, the regime has worked harder to control online speech and shape digital narratives since President Saïed's 2021 power grab. Even if Tunisia lacks Egypt's surveillance skills, it has used similar legal strategies, such as citing national security and "fake news" to detain journalists, bloggers, and social media users who complain about the president. The government resurrected and weaponized Decree Law 54 in 2022 (Morayef, 2024), making it illegal to spread misleading information online and punishing offenders with jail time for a wide range of offenses. For instance, in a politically motivated decision in February 2023, blogger Yassine Ayari was charged with "spreading false information" and sentenced to prison under this law due to critical remarks about President Saïed posted on Facebook (Louter, 2022).

Furthermore, the government has started to develop its own information architecture. In line with Saïed's populist rhetoric about removing a corrupt elite and upholding national sovereignty, state media has adopted a more propagandistic stance. Civil society players reveal growing opacity in government communication and restrictions on public information access. In the meanwhile, the president and "the people" are portrayed as having a direct relationship through digital platforms, eschewing political parties and institutional intermediaries. Saïed regularly speaks to the country by uploading videos on the to the president's Facebook page, in direct, stylized monologues that are presented as unconditioned facts, echoing the rhetoric of populist leaders around the world (Guesmi, 2024). These performances are not merely symbolic; they establish a media grammar that portrays dissent as betrayal and justifies the concentration of power as moral correction.

The development of online repression in both situations exemplifies a more general transition from reactive censorship to proactive narrative control. The authoritarian governments in place since 2013 are curating reality in addition to limiting dissent. This control relies on organized propaganda, algorithmic saturation,

and the legal intimidation of digital expression as well as content removal and activist arrests. In this age of new media, silence is no longer forced through terror alone but through noise, a purposeful inundation of distraction, confusion, and manufactured consensus.

2.2.3 Ideological Reinvention: Nationalism, Populism, and State Narratives

The post-2013 reorganization of authoritarianism has been largely shaped by coercive and technological approaches, but the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia have also made significant investments in redefining the ideological underpinnings of their governance. They have worked to create new state narratives focused on nationalism, more renewal, and populist dichotomies rather than merely using repression or fear. In addition to serving to legitimize the consolidation of power, these narratives also help to reestablish national identity, marginalize dissent, and position authoritarian restoration as an essential component of democracy.

In Egypt, the militarized nationalism of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's post-2013 regime has been based on a binary logic: the state versus chaos, the army versus terrorism, and the nation versus betrayers. Official rhetoric after the overthrow of Morsi focused on the concept of "national salvation", making Sisi the sole person who could keep the country stable and prevent a civil war led by the Brotherhood. In essence, the language used by the regime confused dissent with treachery and opposition with terrorism—what Wedeen (2019) refers to as "loyalty narratives", which call for devotion to the state not only politically but also morally and emotionally.

Several platforms echoed this ideological rephrasing. To give an example, educational curriculum was changed to minimize the 2011 incidents and exalt the military. This is why most allusions to the January 25 Revolution were eliminated in new history textbooks published after 2016, which instead highlighted the bravery of the armed forces and the risks of instability (Egyptian Streets, 2017). National holidays like July 3 (the day of the military coup) or June 30 (the day of the mass protests against Morsi) have progressively supplanted January 25 in official

celebration, thus redefining the coup as a moment of popular redemption rather than a fracture in democracy. This redrafting was clearly further supported by state media, museum displays, and public monuments.

Religious discourse was also activated: the Ministry of Religious Endowments (Awqaf) limited “unauthorized” preachers, while the state-aligned al-Azhar religious authorities encouraged compliance, thereby establishing a connection between political obedience and moral order (Al-Youm, 2014). The Ministry also delivered a directive in 2015 requiring the state to pre-approve and script all Friday sermons. Themes of moral discipline, anti-terrorism, and national unity were incorporated into sermons, and at the same time independent religious voices were suppressed. Lastly, scholars from al-Azhar who opposed the regime’s use of Islam as a political justification were either openly denounced or disregarded.

Ideological reinvention took a different course in Tunisia. Here, the political discourse was pluralistic, fragmented, and frequently transitional for a large portion of the post-revolutionary era. But since 2021, President Kais Saied has attempted to enforce a new moralized populism that revisits political representation and sovereignty (Annovi, 2024). Saied, by employing legalist and anti-elitist rhetoric, positions himself as a tribune of the people, uncontaminated from party corruption, external interference, or ideological affiliation. In fact, in many of his speeches, he invokes the people’s will as a precious force that transcends institutions and supports taking unilateral actions.

Saied has been able to delegitimize political rivals as well as the core principles of the post-2011 constitutional order thanks to this populist rhetoric. According to his account, the 2014 Constitution was a compromise dictated by dishonest elites rather than the result of democratic consensus. Saied blamed the drafters of such constitution of having "sold out Tunisia's sovereignty to foreign powers" in his July 2022 speech announcing the new constitution (Al Jazeera English, 2022), saying that "the people have spoken against those who betrayed the revolution." The revised text, which was purposefully created to give the president interpretive authority over the state's values, abolished all references to political parties, diminished parliamentary checks, and

added ambiguous language regarding religion and national identity. Also, even if most opposition parties banned the 2022 constitutional referendum, it was presented as the return of “true” sovereignty (NEWS WIRES, 2022).

There are substantial consequences due to this ideological framework. It makes it possible to punish dissent as a moral transgression against the "will of the people" as well as a political threat. The resulting interpretation turns democracy into a barrier to unity and pluralism into division, comparable to in Egypt. Saied has often referred to his political project as "cleansing" (tathir), displaying it as an essential purification of the state (Pilati et al., 2019). He depicts opposition leaders in public speeches as members of a foreign-backed elite or a "deep state conspiracy" that undermines the will of the populace. Concretely, this logic was evident in 2023 when Saied claimed that a number of opposition politicians were "plotting against state security under the cover of democracy" in order to justify their arrest (Gobe, 2024).

However, despite everything, while Sisi's narrative is based on institutionalized nationalism and security, Saied's populism is more legalist and performative, thus based on constitutional revisionism, direct presidential interaction, and appealed to moral rectitude and purity. These ideological initiatives are more than just rhetoric in both situations. As instruments of governance, they provide symbolic coherence to dictatorial procedures and mobilize genuine or fabricated public support for a national rebirth perception. Consequently, in the post-2013 MENA context, authoritarianism is being reinvented not just through institutions and innovations but also through fundamental narratives that are used to imagine and contest legitimacy.

2.3 Rethinking the Aftermath: Between Reinvention and Political Legacy

What is left to do at this point, after carefully examining how Egypt and Tunisia responded, adjusted, and reorganized themselves following the revolts, is not to compare again what we already know to be different. Instead, we need to pause and think more deeply about what has survived and what has taken hold. As already said, authoritarian governments have not merely come back but have established themselves beyond the initial wave of resistance and adaptation. Rather than clearing

to reveal the old, the dust of the Arab Spring exposed something changed, impacted by both what was crushed and what survived the revolution. We are left with a political legacy that is unfinished, shaky, but significant, rather than simply a new system of governance. We now shift our focus to this uneasy area between continuity and rupture.

More than ten years later, the political reality has been altered by something more subtle: reinvention through residue, whereas the early 2010s were characterized by rupture and transition. The examples of Egypt and Tunisia have shown so far how authoritarianism not only reappeared but also how it picked up lessons, adjusted, and put itself back together from the fragments of unsuccessful revolutions. These regimes now govern through, rather than against, the memory of 2011. Following the uprising, the authoritarian state has evolved into a hybrid that has its roots in legal frameworks, infused with populist legitimacy, and focused on control over participation. However, it also leaves behind a paradoxical legacy—a collection of unmet expectations, institutional phantoms, and symbolic legacies that still burden governance.

As a result, what Egypt and Tunisia have in common is not a model but rather a political sedimentation: an overlapping of repression, reform, revolution, and selective continuity. These are new orders constructed from the language, illusions, and rubble of transition and not restorations of the previous order. To fully grasp the nature of authoritarian reinvention in the modern MENA region, one must comprehend this intricate layering.

2.3.1 The Afterlife of Transition: Governing with the Legacy of the Past

There is no passive inheritance of political legacies: they are selected, altered, and reframed. Legacy in post-upheavals Egypt and Tunisia is about utilizing the past's fragments to write the present, rather than conserving it. This process changes the logic of legitimacy itself, in addition to institutions (Fong et al., 2019).

In both situations considered, authoritarian rule now functions through what could be referred to as political leftovers: constitutions that are still cited even after revisions, parliaments that have lost some of their authority, and reform-born legal

frameworks that are now used as tools of control. The structure the uprisings momentarily erected — used today to denote normality, legality, or inclusion — is what remains, rather than the spirit of the revolts (Al-Khalili et al., 2023). Then, this selective survival does not reflect nostalgia, but strategy.

The concept of political legacy is thus crucial. It involves the active use of those remnants to steady regimes in the present, not just the memory of rebellion or the institutional artifacts left behind (Verovšek, 2020). According to academics such as Loxton (2024), legacies serve as both a resource and a constraint, because although they may haunt regimes, they also offer procedural and symbolic cover for authoritarian renewal. Modern authoritarianism does not arise in a vacuum; rather, it operates within a framework that has already been influenced by prior claims of legitimacy, popular empowerment, and institutional experimentation.

This is especially evident in the way that regimes control the law and public opinion. Both Egypt's counterterrorism laws and Tunisia's 2022 constitution are variations of past reformist initiatives that have reemerged in more centralized, executive-dominated forms rather than being outright ruptures (NEW WIRES, 2022; Cafiero, 2020). Even participatory mechanisms, like state-led national dialogues, are still employed not to reallocate power, but to simulate inclusion and diffuse criticism. Yet, although it operates under the shadow of the previous system, this is a recalibrated form of government rather than a return to the authoritarianism of before 2011.

In essence, what the transitions failed to demolish and what oppressive governments have since appropriated have greatly influenced the current political climate in both Egypt and Tunisia. In this context, legacy refers to strategic inheritance instead of continuity or rupture: the continuous use and manipulation of transitional elements to govern in a time characterized more by the memory of its unmet promises than by revolution.

Therefore, rather than being simply restored, these regimes are reconceived through a legacy that serves as both a barrier and a strength. New control frameworks have reabsorbed the very instruments that once symbolized democratic hope (Heydemann, 2007). Any analysis of authoritarian adaptation in the MENA

region after 2011 must take this paradox into account. What comes from Egypt and Tunisia is a template of resilience whose implications now go well beyond the boundaries of each state, rather than a model to be replicated. For this reason, the analysis will move outside the national level as we proceed to the next chapter. The objective is to investigate the ways in which these authoritarian changes have an impact both domestically and globally, exposing not simply the flexibility of regimes, but also the new geopolitical order that has arisen from the ashes of uprising.

CHAPTER 3

GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS

Despite being firmly anchored in their respective histories, Egypt's and Tunisia's paths provide insights that cut across national borders. As we already know, following the Arab uprisings, authoritarianism not only persevered but also reevaluated itself as a more adaptable, transnational phenomenon that reflects wider changes in the political landscape of the world.

These developments speak to a broader political moment where the resurgence of coercive authority and the deterioration of democratic expectations coexist, rather than being special anomalies or regional coincidences. Once seen as a watershed, the Arab Spring now seems more like a spark for new kinds of control that are more integrated, more interconnected, and less overtly violent but just as successful. Accordingly, Egypt and Tunisia are no longer isolated instances but rather pressure points in a global system where authoritarian resilience is becoming more pervasive, adaptive, and ideologically malleable.

In accordance to this perspective, the effects of 2011 are not limited to a specific area or the failure of a democratic transition. It persists as a structural echo, resonating through the plans, fears, and aspirations of regimes that have figured out how to not only combat uprisings but also how to channel and absorb their energy.

3.1 Democratization under Threat: Regional and Global Lessons

Despite the Arab uprisings initially promising a democratic achievement, what came out instead was a redefinition of the political terrain itself. In addition to acting as role models for their neighbours, Egypt and Tunisia changed regional norms with regard to resistance, reform, and regime change. The alterations they brought about and the authoritarian tendencies that resurfaced after them served as both regional cautionary tales and international turning points. Their paths served as a warning to regimes and populations alike about what a failed democracy might look like.

In this regard, the fact that authoritarianism is increasingly internationalizing offers an additional point of reflection. Although they possess distinct historical and

cultural origins, seemingly disparate regimes today share a hybrid model of control that incorporates populist rhetoric, advanced digital surveillance technologies, and meticulous manipulation of media narratives. The concept of a "global network of authoritarianism" is highlighted by this dynamic, where narrative and restrictive approaches are controlled at a transnational level (Tsourapas, 2020). Administrations like those in Egypt and Tunisia can learn from one another and even import control models used in other geopolitical contexts thanks to this network, which promotes the exchange of practices and techniques while preserving individual local characteristics. In this perspective, the analysis does not focus on the regional level but rather on a worldwide awareness of power transformations, where state control relies on digitalization processes which test traditional boundaries.

The Arab world is not alone in spreading authoritarian practices. Trends comparable to those in Egypt and Tunisia can be seen in other democratically elected regimes, where the decline of pluralism and the concentration of power are mirrored. According to Easton and Siverson (2018), President Erdoğan's post-2016 consolidation of executive control in Turkey was founded on ideological nationalism, cleanse of state institutions, and security rhetoric—strategies that were remarkably similar to those used in Sisi's Egypt. India under Narendra Modi provides yet another illustration of a hybrid form of governance that alters democracy due to exclusion, since religious identity, populist appeals, and the legal suppression of dissent have existed alongside electoral legitimacy (Vasudeva, 2025). Even in Brazil, Bolsonaro's digital propaganda machine and militarized language harked back to the narrative control strategies employed by Arab regimes after 2011.

Some regimes came with different conclusions. Morocco's monarchy, for example, anticipated turmoil and co-opted protest before it spread by implementing constitutional changes and holding early elections in 2011. Nevertheless, Morocco's reforms were strictly regulated from above and did not jeopardize the monarchy's supremacy (Yom & Gause, 2012), in contrast to Tunisia, where constitutional reform was actually contested, or Egypt, where transitional processes collapsed into military control. This divergence shows that the monarchies could have allowed themselves to

stage a preventive adaption without actually opening up political space, unlike the receptive collapses in Egypt and Tunisia.

Algeria's 2019 Hirak protests were popular, widespread, and ostensibly non-ideological, evoking Tunisia's early revolutionary moment (Hemchi & Benantar, 2023). However, Algeria's regime chose to make procedural concessions along with institutional inertia, while Tunisia experienced a negotiated transition, despite being unsteady. Although Bouteflika resigned, the military core was left intact. This difference highlights a larger lesson: regimes that survived 2011 improved their containment tactics by learning how to react and, more importantly, how not to, from the partial collapses of Egypt and Tunisia.

A further lesson was provided by Syria, Libya, and Yemen, this time about the consequences of complete failure of authoritarian adaptation. The negative model was their plunge into civil war (Erdogan, 2025), which neighbouring governments used as a warning to justify a return to authoritarianism as being better than collapse. The threat of Egypt "becoming Syria" was frequently invoked to defend the military's retake of power in 2013. The public discourse that frames consolidation as essential to preventing national disintegration has also coincided with Tunisia's slow erosion of democratic norms under Kais Saied (Yerkes & Muasher, 2017). The fear of fragmentation has evolved into a strategic asset in both nations.

As a result of these cases, a regional trend emerged: authoritarian governments now respond to protests as predictable phenomena that can be neutralized, redirected, or channeled rather than as external shocks (Droz-Vincent, 2018). Egypt and Tunisia served as more than just case studies; they worked as models for re-establishing authority through the use of transitional language. Constitutions are revised, but power is concentrated; elections are held, but they are strictly regulated; parliaments are maintained, but they are stripped of their actual authority. Saied's Tunisia seems to retain the architecture of democracy—a president, a parliament, a referendum—but in reality it deprives it of pluralism and institutional balance.

Throughout the region, authoritarianism has mastered the art of adaptability while solidifying its power. Opposition is fragmented and exhausted rather than

empowered by legal reforms, anti-corruption narratives, "national dialogues," and selective liberalization. This signals a turn toward strategic repression, which is legalistic, calibrated, and frequently presented as reform in and of itself, according to Josua and Edel (2021).

The remarkable thing is that these techniques are no longer detached reactions. By means of regional media, diplomatic coordination, and even digital surveillance tools, a common grammar of authoritarian adaptation has surfaced. As defined by Freedom House (2022), this is a component of a broader "authoritarian internationalism," wherein regimes learn from one another how to control their image, narrative, and legal legitimacy while also repressing dissent.

There are considerable implications for democratization. The experiences in Egypt and Tunisia not only disrupted a hypothetical regional shift, but they also called into question the notion that democratic change is gradual or linear. When authoritarian regimes are structurally built-in and have the capacity to change, the "transition paradigm," which has long dominated political science (Carothers, 2002), loses its explanatory power. Rather, we see the institutionalization of ambiguity: structures that appropriate democratic language while redefining its essence.

On a societal level, this shift has impacted the emotional economy of rebellion. If 2011 was characterized by a common optimism, then the following years have witnessed the emergence of exhaustion, cynicism, and the assimilation of authoritarian reasoning. Disappointment with democracy has limited political creativity in Egypt and Tunisia. Rupture has given way to resignation across the region (Khelil, 2024). Even though democratic aspirations persist, they are now more dispersed, localized, and depoliticized; they are frequently directed toward economic complaints rather than structural opposition. This passage has also made self-censorship in daily life more commonplace. Many actors have adapted by rephrasing dissent as a technocratic issue, avoiding confrontation, or muting critique in an atmosphere in which political involvement is seen as risky or pointless. Civil society is still active but is becoming more circumspect due to legal ambiguities and the legacy of failed uprisings. Silence turns from being a survival tactic to a form of

government as anxiety gives way to exhaustion (Khneisser, 2019). Instead of indifference, a rebalanced political imagination where change seems unattainable and resignation makes sense takes over.

In sum, Egypt's and Tunisia's post-2011 paths have changed the political lexicon of the MENA region and give more than context-specific results. Previously a regional horizon, democratization is now the exception to an authoritarian norm that is resilient and flexible. The Arab Spring didn't just fail; it demonstrated populations to have lower expectations and taught regimes how to survive better. These lessons are still relevant today, both in terms of policy and the subtle reevaluation of what change is perceived to entail.

3.2 Scenarios for Egypt, Tunisia, and Beyond

As we look ahead, the interaction between domestic political variables and the larger global geopolitical landscape will probably affect the future development of authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, as well as the surrounding area. As these nations adapt to an era marked by swift technological progress, shifting alliances among superpowers, and enduring domestic tensions, a number of scenarios could materialize in the years to come. At the root of these progressions is a dynamic process whereby authoritarian governments adjust by taking lessons from transnational practices in addition to strengthening their hold on power through internal repressive mechanisms (Tsourapas, 2020). Therefore, as previously stated, the idea of a "global network of authoritarianism," in which narrative and limiting approaches are controlled and shared across national boundaries, implies that governments like those in Egypt and Tunisia can profit from—and sometimes even adopt—control models that have been tried and tested in other geopolitical areas.

For instance, the regime in Egypt is expected to become increasingly dependent on widespread surveillance systems and a legal system that makes complaints illegal. Given the speed at which technological advances are spreading, Egypt's repressive apparatus may use online propaganda and artificial intelligence-driven monitoring to forestall dissent (Lynch, 2022). Clearly this would not be an

isolated phenomenon; rather, it would exemplify the global trend of authoritarian regimes adopting transnational tactics. In this case, regimes in the MENA region are likely to bring in or modify the lessons learned from digital innovations in nations like China and Russia, which have substantially enhanced online control methodologies (Polyakova & Meserole, 2019). Specifically, the Egyptian case may turn into a model of state-led digital autocracy, strengthening its hold on society through the use of technology and judicial suppression.

Conversely, Tunisia offers a distinct set of possibilities and difficulties. Tunisia is currently at a turning point in its history, which was characterized by a relatively smooth transition after the Arab Spring. The nation has witnessed the selective deterioration of democratic institutions under President Kais Saied, who has simultaneously also invoked popular legitimacy (Ghali & Hanelt, 2024). In this regard, the rise of a hybrid regime that incorporates aspects of participatory governance with populist rhetoric to support executive consolidation is one potential future development. Nevertheless, such a model will probably remain unstable since socioeconomic pressures and domestic political polarization could sabotage any long-term institutional reform process (Weilandt, 2018). Also, by investigating how other countries in Eastern Europe or Asia have balanced popular participation and strongman rule, Tunisia's developing model might profit from transnational experiences. This could result in a synthesis where selective liberalization is combined with pervasive limitations on political diversity and freedom of expression.

Nonetheless, it is impractical to separate Egypt's and Tunisia's futures from outside geopolitical factors. By providing not merely diplomatic validation but also financial and technological support, geopolitical powers like China and Russia are investing more and more in bilateral relationships with autocratic governments. For example, Russia's backing to Egypt's security apparatus has boosted the regime's ability to repress by supplying tactical expertise and cutting-edge surveillance technology (Hamzawy & Ji, 2024). Likewise, China's Belt and Road Initiative has led to economic ties that occasionally push recipient nations to embrace governance styles that align with Beijing's own version of state authority. In this regard, Egypt and China

commemorated the tenth anniversary of their comprehensive strategic partnership in 2024 when President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi visited Beijing and agreed upon new agreements to expand their cooperation. Important documents include cooperation on China's Belt and Road Initiative, with substantial Chinese investments in Egyptian initiatives such as the new Administrative Capital and the Suez Canal Economic Zone (AfricaNews, 2024).

Additionally, Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, are also crucial because they possess a history of supporting regimes politically and financially, which helps them withstand opposition at home. As a result, these external forces encourage and normalize the consolidation of authoritarian power in a global setting.

Simultaneously, Western democracies and supranational entities like the United States and the European Union are dealing with a challenging situation. On the one hand, they have voiced concerns about the degradation of democratic institutions and human rights abuses in nations such as Egypt and Tunisia. Still, they are frequently forced to interact with authoritarian regimes in a practical way due to their strategic interests, which range from counterterrorism cooperation to access to regional resources (Werr, 2024; Arena, 2024). Consequently, the geopolitical imperatives of stability and economic cooperation frequently balance out external pressures for democratization. This dichotomy may result in a situation where outside influence becomes a double-edged sword: pragmatic alliances advance current authoritarian practices, while international norms urge reform. Neither Egypt nor Tunisia are likely to undergo an immediate democratization process due to this ongoing struggle between normative pressure and strategic interest; instead, these nations may show a slow, inconsistent evolution which reflects the convergence of external support and domestic inertia (Mitchell, 2016).

Another scenario that deserves consideration regards the likelihood for internal crisis to spark substantial political change. Both Egypt and Tunisia have shown a great deal of resilience, but persistent social inequality, political repression, and financial struggles could eventually lead to widespread mobilization. The elite associations that

endorse authoritarian regimes may be shattered if such mobilization turns into a protracted popular uprising (Stenslie & Selvik, 2019). Nevertheless, the results of these crises are always unpredictable. A negotiated political settlement which terminates in a hybrid form of government—one that introduces only modest institutional reforms while conserving some aspects of authoritarian control—is at one extreme of the spectrum. On the flip side, an uncontrolled popular revolt might lead to the overthrow of the government and plunge the nation into turbulence or even civil war (Wright, 2015). Given the ingrained character of state institutions and the lessons autocrats have learned recently, the latter scenario appears to be less probable, but the potential of revolutionary change cannot be completely ruled out.

At the regional level, the Middle East and North Africa as a whole will probably be impacted by the changing forms of authoritarianism in Egypt and Tunisia. The growth of digital surveillance, the improvement of legal tools to suppress dissent, and the international sharing of oppressive methods are not unique to these nations (Lynch, 2022). Instead, they are just a component of a larger pattern where authoritarian methods have spread throughout the world. Similar tactics are being used by regimes to maintain control in a variety of contexts, including Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and even some regions of Latin America (Abdelmeguid, 2024). The necessity of considering domestic authoritarian trends in a broader international context is highlighted by this convergence, which is frequently made possible by global networks of expertise in digital governance and repressive technology (Talebi, 2022).

In summary, a precarious balance characterizes what lies ahead for Egypt, Tunisia, and beyond. On one side, there is the possibility of greater authoritarian consolidation, which would be fueled by improvements in technology, global channels of repression, and advantageous external partnerships with nations like China, Russia, and the Gulf monarchies. However, there is a chance for gradual change due to underlying pressures coming from domestic dissatisfaction, economic difficulties, and the potential for opposing forces to emerge. Worldwide trends, such as the spread of oppressive tactics and the interaction of various geopolitical interests,

combine to produce an unpredictable environment where governance's future is still heavily reliant on both internal and external variables.

3.3 Authoritarianism 2.0: Challenges in the Post-2020 Phase

A new stage of authoritarian evolution is developing against this backdrop of unpredictability and mixed results, one that draws from both new global crises and institutional legacies from the past. Authoritarian governments have been welcoming what could be called *Authoritarianism 2.0* since 2020. This is a redesigned form of government that capitalizes on environmental strain, technological advancement, and public health crises to strengthen executive power. This new era is distinguished by the systemic incorporation of surveillance, algorithmic governance, and crisis-based legitimacy, which jointly produce a more versatile and forward-looking version of authoritarian rule rather than a return to harsh forms of repression.

3.3.1 COVID-19 and the Normalization of Emergency Powers

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic gave authoritarian governments a special excuse for bolstering their executive branch. In Egypt, for example, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi utilized the health crisis to broaden the application of the 2015 anti-terrorism law, permitting military courts to bring charges against civilians who were allegedly disobeying health commands or "spreading false news" concerning the pandemic (Ardovini, 2022). Similar steps were taken in Tunisia, where the state had used emergency powers to centralize the public health response just before Kais Saied's constitutional power grab in July 2021, ignoring parliamentary procedures and avoiding judicial oversight (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2021).

What facilitated the entrenchment of authoritarian rule during the pandemic was the way in which crisis management became routine and stripped of political debate. Presented as a strictly technical response to a health emergency, the extension of state power was frequently seen as necessary and temporary. Nevertheless, the line between political control and health safeguarding ended up being increasingly hazy as the pandemic went on (Ha et al., 2024). Selective curfews were implemented in

Egypt and Tunisia, captures were conducted against regime opponents under false pretenses, and emergency decrees gave security forces greater operational freedom.

This dynamic can be better grasped in light of the conceptual frameworks relating to the state of exception and biopolitics. As Carl Schmitt (1922) argued, sovereignty essentially lies in the ability to decide on the exception, to interrupt the normal legal order in the name of its preservation. Giorgio Agamben (2005) subsequently extended this insight, noting how contemporary governments have a tendency to formalize the exception, turning emergency into a permanent paradigm of governmentality. Within this premise, as extraordinary measures are accepted and incorporated into regular governance, they become more and more similar in terms of legality and illegality. In the context of COVID-19, recent scholarship has applied this framework to demonstrate how emergency orders and quarantine policies perpetuated a constitutionalized kind of exceptionalism even in liberal democracies (MagShamhráin, 2022). As a result, the pandemic was a prime example of what Agamben called the “threshold between law and life”, wherein appeals to collective safety legitimized the suspension of rights. It did not simply introduce ad hoc emergency measures; it intensified a pre-existing architecture of exception that had already been justified in the name of national security and counterterrorism.

Furthermore, the use of medicalized language and metrics to govern populations, the so called bio-political discourse (Lorenzini, 2020), enabled regimes to defend extraordinary powers without explicitly mentioning ideological grounds. In order to guarantee public compliance, national unity narratives, fears of contagion, and appeals to shared responsibility were used in addition to obvious coercion. Authoritarian regimes could thus claim a paternalistic role as guardians of the stability and well-being of the country. As a consequence, a new kind of soft coercion arose: one in which the language of necessity and care was employed to justify monitoring, control, and restriction.

Importantly, the legal and infrastructure changes produced during the pandemic have lasted longer than the actual emergency. In Egypt, laws meant to combat COVID-19 have since been recycled to hinder online dissent, restrict protest

activity, and limit NGO operations under expansive interpretations of public security (Andorvini, 2022). In Tunisia, although the initial rationale was connected to institutional dysfunction and health issues, Saied's declaration of a state of exception in July 2021 was openly justified as a prolongation of emergency logic (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2021). This progressive evolution is indicative of what Agamben (2005) referred to as the "permanent state of exception"—a continuous suspension of customary democratic processes that turns into a new rule of law.

Therefore, the pandemic accelerated preexisting trends rather than generating a rupture. It provided authoritarian governments policy tools and discursive legitimacy that might endure and grow (Thomson & Ip, 2020). These strategies' success additionally set precedents for future crises, whether they be security, environmental, or economic, making it simpler for rulers to appeal emergency reasoning in the future. In this regard, COVID-19 did not construct authoritarianism 2.0; it quickened its formation.

Most notably, the pandemic normalized a governance design that is very similar to what Kudejira (2023) defines as disaster authoritarianism: a system in which emergencies are used not simply to handle crises but to root and perpetuate authoritarian power through depoliticized, seemingly neutral interventions. As demonstrated in Zimbabwe during Cyclone Idai, as well as in Egypt and Tunisia during COVID-19, governments have leveraged disaster response plans to strengthen control, reduce opposition, and restrict freedoms (Scheppele & Pozen, 2020). They frequently collaborated with global organizations that prioritized effectiveness over accountability. This dynamic was thus exacerbated worldwide by the pandemic, which allowed executive overreach to become ingrained in routine administrative procedures. Laws and surveillance instruments that were at first presented as short-term fixes eventually became permanent parts of the state's institutional and legal framework.

This shift has deep ramifications for our understanding of authoritarian resilience since it goes beyond merely suppressing dissent to include the calculated use of crisis to restructure the relationship between the state and society. As a result,

COVID-19 responses turned into performative sites of credibility, allowing regimes to reframe control as protection, demonstrate competence, and impose obedience all at once. Once an overlooked aspect of governance, the logic of exception is now frequently used and widely acknowledged. Simply put, the pandemic was a political catalyst as well as a public health emergency, expanding the operational arsenal and societal acceptance of authoritarian tactics camouflaging as necessity.

3.3.2 Artificial Intelligence and Predictive Control

Artificial intelligence (AI) represents a dramatic shift from reactive repression to anticipatory control in authoritarian governance systems. According to reports, the Egyptian government has used AI-powered monitoring tools to trace activist digital networks, track online speech, and spot new protest trends before they become real. Bilateral interactions with nations such as China and Russia, which not only supply the infrastructure but also encourage data governance models in line with authoritarian needs, are frequently used to import such technologies (Yilmaz et al., 2025). On the other side, Tunisia, despite having less sophisticated digital skills, has expressed curiosity about improving biometric registration systems and predictive policing frameworks, especially in the context of counterterrorism and migration management.

This technological evolution is part of a larger trend regarding how authoritarian governments handle risk. Beyond expanding the technical capacities of surveillance, artificial intelligence also modifies the temporal logic of authoritarian control. Rather than reacting to perceived threats, AI-assisted systems enable regimes to anticipate and pre-empt dissent through predictive policing, risk-scoring of individuals and neighbourhoods, and automated flagging of “deviant” online behaviour. In this sense, predictive control turns the logic of the exception into a forward-looking practice: states no longer suspend ordinary rules only when a danger materializes, but justify permanent monitoring and targeted interventions on the basis of anticipated, data-driven scenarios of instability.

Instead of responding to resistance, they attempt to automatically identify, classify, and anticipate it, thus creating what Zuboff (2019) refers to as "instrumentarian power": a type of governance that functions via controlled intervention, behavioural prediction, and data extraction. This paradigm anticipates and neutralizes dissent in its initial stages rather than just punishing it after the fact. As a result, citizens are perceived by the state as data subjects who are constantly tracked and graded for deviations rather than as political actors.

Systems like this don't operate in a vacuum. They are part of a political economy of surveillance where governments benefit from the appearance of modernization while private sector actors, including international tech firms, gain from the export of repressive tools. In the name of urban management, for instance, facial recognition and crowd-control analytics—marketed as smart-city infrastructure—are installed in public areas, but the truth is that they are used to prevent gatherings and stifle dissent (Talebi, 2022). Such instruments are becoming increasingly considered as necessary for upholding "security-first governance" in the MENA region, especially in crowded urban areas where instability is more likely to occur.

In addition, there are rarely any noteworthy legal protections or public accountability when AI is used in authoritarian environments. Laws are either nonexistent, out of date, or created to encourage rather than restrict surveillance. Emergency regulations put in place during the COVID-19 pandemic are still in effect in many places and offer broad defenses for the ongoing use of metadata analysis, drone oversight, and data collection under the guise of national security.

The social experience of power is also reshaped by the advent of AI-driven control systems. Individuals start self-censoring because they are afraid of being punished by the state and because they are not sure about what the algorithms may find suspicious (Cevallos, 2025). This generates a mental state of opacity in which probabilistic judgments made by opaque systems determine the limits of risk and legality rather than defining them directly. The effect is chilling: political behaviour

is discouraged by surrounding anxiety over unseen monitoring mechanisms rather than just by severe repression.

Therefore, predictive control is a silent revolution in authoritarian tactics in this new paradigm. It enables regimes to rule by skepticism rather than conviction, by potentiality rather than action. By doing this, it deepens the scope of governmental authority into the realm of daily life, affecting not just what people say but also what they believe is appropriate to say. Consequently, authoritarianism 2.0 engineers compliance through anticipation instead of just hindering dissent.

3.3.3 *Climate Crisis and the Securitization of Ecology*

If technology and health crises have already shown themselves to be favourable conditions for authoritarian entrenchment, the climate crisis is quickly developing into a third pillar in this changing architecture of control. In the framework of *Authoritarianism 2.0*, the degradation of the environment is not just a governance challenge, but also a strategic opportunity: a new narrative that regimes use to reshape state-society relations, boost their power, and establish legitimacy.

In Egypt, national security reasoning is being increasingly used to frame environmental discussions. Resource pressures brought on by climate change, especially the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam's (GERD) water shortage, have been presented by the government as existential threats that call for centralized authority. Massive state-led projects like the New Administrative Capital and massive desert reclamation plans have been justified by such securitized framing. The thing is that despite these initiatives being marketed as ecological or developmental remedies, they concretely serve as tools for elite consolidation, regime branding, and territorial expansion. In essence, these programs frequently concentrate power within executive bodies, avoid public consultation, and are run by entities with ties to the military.

Simultaneously, environmental civil society — which includes non-governmental organizations, neighbourhood associations, and unofficial activist networks — has been under growing pressure. NGOs have to deal with heavy legal requirements, ambiguous registration processes, and a political environment that

views environmental advocacy with suspicion. Then, state-aligned organizations control public discourse on climate policy, especially during major conferences like COP27, where critical voices were notably missing, independent activists are the targets of surveillance, intimidation, and arrest in certain situations. As shown by Human Rights Watch (2022), this form of repression reflects a purposeful and pervasive strategy for managing environmental issues through security-based measures, indicating that it is systemic rather than a singular instance. As a result, the civil society sector has transitioned from advocacy to survival, making most organizations focused on compliance and risk avoidance rather than mobilization and policy influence (Zayed, 2024).

Tunisia provides a comparable but different path. Though less militarized, state control over emergency narratives, including those involving environmental stress, has intensified in the post-2021 political landscape. Water deficits, pollution, and agricultural decline have led to protests in rural areas like Kairouan and Gafsa, where security interventions and surveillance have been adopted instead of a structural change (Amnesty International, 2025). Thus, the concept that environmental arguments are subordinate to state stability is reinforced by the frequent delegitimization of such local mobilization tactics as acts of turbulence rather than ecological justice. In this regard, environmental civil society has encountered increasing limitations (Human Rights Watch, 2024) that restrict its capacity to function autonomously or express disapproval. These actors tend to be depicted as politically dubious or outside-influenced rather than as valid players in environmental governance: no matter if their demands are based on technical or ecological issues, they are usually reframed as threats to public order or national unity. Therefore, the state's approach to climate and ecological stress intentionally precludes the possibility that environmental complaints might develop into more expansive forums for democratic engagement.

Scholars refer to this regional pattern as “*green authoritarianism*” or “*eco authoritarianism*”: a style of governance where ecological deterioration is controlled from top to bottom, typically through coercive methods, all while using the

justifications of urgency and survival (Shahar, 2015). Regimes centralize decision-making, avoid consultation, and incorporate ecological responses into national security frameworks rather than seeking collaborative environmental solutions. Thus, the climate turns thus into a frontier for disciplinary governance instead of a space for democratic innovation. However, beyond the securitization of ecology, these practises also reveal the developmental paradigms that modern authoritarian regimes are trying to build. Their vision of contemporaneity tends to couple technological progress with centralized domination, presenting mega-projects of infrastructure or energy as a manifestation of national power rather than as tools of social or environmental justice. Unlike the participatory and sustainability-focused rhetoric advanced in Western democracies, this model favours visibility, speed, and control — modernization without democratization (Foa, 2018). If anything, however, the dividing line is far from clear: even liberal economies frequently reproduce similar extractive logics under green labels, which would suggest that the gap between authoritarian and democratic visions of ecological modernity may be smaller than it seems.

The curious thing is that this approach works outside of domestic politics as well. An illustration of this external dimension of authoritarian climate policy is Egypt's 2022 COP27 leadership. While still repressing environmental dissent within its borders, the regime aims to restore its reputation abroad and draw in green funding by portraying itself as a global environmental steward (Soliman, 2022). This dual posture (cooperative overseas and repressive at home) reflects larger trends in authoritarian diplomacy, where climate commitment serves as a buffer against democratic conditionality.

Consequently, the securitization of ecology is a political endeavour which encourages authoritarian resilience rather than just a reaction to environmental pressure. Systems like those in Egypt or Tunisia are able to reclaim state control over contested spaces redefine vulnerability as a rationale for executive centralization, and marginalize those who call for ecological and democratic justice by managing the definition, communication, and handling of climate risks. As *authoritarianism 2.0*

takes hold, climate change is not merely an environmental issue but also a political governance instrument.

3.4 War, Authoritarianism, and the Politics of Distraction

As noted in the previous sections, authoritarian governments in Egypt and Tunisia have been increasingly employing crisis narrative in defence of boosted executive control. Such measures as pandemic emergency legislation, securitization of climate change, and the use of predictive monitoring tools are all components of a larger trend toward *authoritarianism 2.0*, a model that focuses not only on repression but also on flexibility, transnational learning, and the ability to govern in extraordinary circumstances. Armed conflicts, domestically as well as globally, have become effective tools of authoritarian consolidation within this evolving context. Wars are no longer solely external events; they are now strategic assets which enable authorities to reorient public attention, quell opposition, and reiterate their geopolitical significance.

In Egypt, the ongoing conflict in Gaza has given the Sisi administration a new chance to establish ethical power and regional dominance (Teller, 2025). Meanwhile, internal discontent has been suppressed in the name of national security and unity. The regime's picture as protector and stabilizer is strengthened by the militarization of the Sinai Peninsula, the portrayal of Egypt as "humanitarian mediator", and the narrative of an external existential danger. Weeden (2015) referred to these dynamics as "performative governance": a political arena in which symbolic acts of control, instead of democratic responsiveness, are used to construct legitimacy. In essence, the regime takes advantage of regional diplomacy to further its foreign policy objectives and relies on the appearance of necessity to justify authoritarianism at home. Notably, the Gaza conflict has shifted the public discourse toward the border threat by allowing Cairo to frame any criticism, whether it be about corruption, repression, or inflation, as premature or unpatriotic (Teller, 2025). Thus, in this case war acts as both an internal governance tool and a foreign policy event, permitting the executive branch to consolidate power under the false pretext of an outdoor emergency.

Despite not being directly engaged in regional tension, Tunisia has shown a similar application of this crisis rhetoric. External challenges, specifically migration flows and Western conditionality, have been invoked as reasons for executive consolidation since president Kais Saied's 2021 power grab. Through expressions like "sovereignty", "dignity", and "purification" characterizing his vision of national renewal, Saied's rhetoric depicts Tunisia as being under siege from foreign interference (Sadiki et al., 2024). This is consistent with Heydemann's (2007) idea of "authoritarian upgrading", wherein governments combine coercion, populism, and international positioning to adjust to changing pressures. In addition to serving as a diversion from economic stagnation, the securitization of migration, particularly the image of sub-Saharan migrants as an "invasion" (Pascual & Gratacap, 2025), also functions as a practical means of bringing together certain segments of the populace behind a false threat. Furthermore, regional unrest, such as the war in Gaza and increasing hostility in the Mediterranean, is being used to illustrate Tunisia's peril, with the government being presented as the only one protecting the nation from the chaos outside. In this context, the proximity of war turns into a rhetorical advantage, allowing the President to compel allegiance, restrict criticism, and portray his rule as the sole remedy for chaos. This means that even if there is no actual military engagement, the display of war provides an air of urgency that fortifies authoritarian control.

Most importantly, such applications of conflict and insecurity do not live in a vacuum: they are made possible by global dynamics. The conflict in Ukraine, for instance, has forced the Global North to reevaluate its priorities, due to food security, energy diversification, and migration control taking precedence over democratic conditionality. Egypt, acting as a gas hub and strategic ally, has profited from this position, while Tunisia, with barely a suspicion of repression, keeps getting concrete migration-related assistance from the EU. What is important here to notice, how Levitsky and Way (2010) point out, is that regimes with high geopolitical utility and low external leverage end up being genuinely insulated from any democratizing pressure. Hence, this form of political shield allows autocracies to rule by diverting attention without worrying about the repercussions on a global scale.

In the process, these dynamics reinforce the trend of normalized emergency. As explained above, thanks to Agamben's (2005) concept of state of exception, we can comprehend how regimes institutionalize crisis: what may have started off as an extraordinary situation, it grows to become the legal and political norm. In both countries, the intermittent use of emergency laws, anti-terrorism legislation, and censorship has resulted in the blurring of the boundary between crisis response and regular governance. Consequently, the performance of crises becomes a structural feature of authoritarian rule, providing fluidity to the government, suppressing demands, and rationalizing repression in the name of national survival.

At the same time, governing through distraction is not totally cynical but arises from structural pressures mounting onto regime changes. Inflationary growth, increased debt, and widescale socio-economic dissatisfaction are worrying Egypt and Tunisia. In such a situation, the usage of war discourse, panic related to migration, or diplomatic spectacle is the last attempt to compensate for fading material legitimacy by threatening and seeking causes of urgency. Thus, repression ends up being not only a reaction to unrest, but also a preventive step: to defend themselves, regimes exert fear, polarization, and the externalization of danger to stifle any seeds of dissent before they fully develop into collective mobilization through anticipation, and not necessarily through force (Wedeen, 2019).

However, political contradictions may result from the weaponization of crises. Crises heighten social grievances, reveal state capacity (or lack thereof), and occasionally inspire unanticipated forms of collective action. The worldwide economic instability, unemployment, and deterioration of public services incited riots in cities scattered across Egypt and Tunisia. As Tarrow (2011) reminds us, contentious politics persists under authoritarianism, though it does so by means of fragmented, decentralized, and informal resistance rather than open defiance. In his framework, contentious politics refers to a repertoire of collective actions – including strikes, localized protests, boycotts, and digital campaigns – that does not disappear when political opportunity structures close, but rather shifts towards episodic, low-visibility, and often informal practices. Under such conditions, repression and the restriction of

public space do not eliminate conflict; they instead push it into micro-mobilizations, sporadic protest cycles, and issue-specific eruptions that periodically resurface around grievances related to prices, public services, or police violence. In Egypt, for example, small-scale labour strikes, neighbourhood protests against rising living costs, and online campaigns denouncing police abuses testify to the survival of contentious politics in a fragmented form, even when large-scale demonstrations are no longer tolerated. In Tunisia, episodic mobilizations in marginalized regions, protests against youth unemployment, and sporadic gatherings against Kais Saied's measures likewise reveal an underlying layer of permanent contestation that never fully disappears, despite the tightening of executive control. Therefore, authoritarianism 2.0, in some respects, is continuously managing the axis of control and volatility, seeking not only to repress dissent but to govern, disperse, and pre-empt these diffuse and intermittent forms of contentious politics.

CONCLUSION

More than a decade after the 2011 uprisings, the political record of the Arab Spring continues to elude simplistic reading. If those events were initially interpreted as the announcement of an inevitable process of democratization, subsequent evolution has shown how fragile the idea of a linearity between popular mobilization and institutional change was. The analysis conducted in this thesis suggests that the true legacy of this incident lies not so much in its apparent defeat as in the profound transformation of the ways in which authoritarian power is exercised, justified, and reproduced. In light of this, the central question is not whether the uprisings were successful or not, but what kind of political order they helped generate.

The experience of Egypt and Tunisia clearly shows how contemporary authoritarianism has not simply returned to its starting point, but has undergone a process of adaptation that makes it different, more flexible, and, in many respects, more resilient than in the past. The revolutions acted as a systemic shock that forced the ruling elites to revise strategies, languages, and tools of control. The result was not a definitive collapse, but a selective reorganization of power, capable of incorporating some of the lessons learned during the mobilization phase and neutralizing, in the long run, the subversive potential of change. The authoritarianism that persisted after 2011 is therefore not a simple restoration: it is a refreshed form that governs through the memory of the crisis, rather than despite it.

One of the most significant elements that emerged from the analysis concerns the liminal nature of the post-revolutionary period. Far from being a brief transition phase towards a new equilibrium, this space of uncertainty has prolonged over time, becoming a structural condition. In that context, the absence of a fully legitimized political order created fertile ground for the intervention of authoritarian actors suitable for presenting themselves as guarantors of stability, order and continuity. Liminality, rather than automatically opening up to democratization, has made possible an asymmetric competition between political alternatives, in which authoritarian forces have benefited from institutional, coercive, and symbolic resources clearly superior to those of the opposition. In this sense, the unfinished

transition was not an accidental failure, but a condition structurally vulnerable to authoritarian reconfiguration.

A further contribution of this research is the attention paid to the non-exclusively institutional dimension of power. It has been showed how the survival of regimes cannot be explained solely through the repression or co-optation of elites, but requires a deeper understanding of the ideological and emotional mechanisms that underpin political obedience. Fear, fatigue, disillusionment and nostalgia are not simple social reactions, but actively mobilized political resources. In Egypt, the promise of security has gradually replaced that of freedom, while in Tunisia the call for moral purity and popular will has made it possible to delegitimize democratic pluralism without immediately resorting to mass violence. In both cases, authoritarianism has been able to present itself not as an imposition, but as a rational and even necessary response to a shared experience of crisis.

This ability to rework the meaning of revolution represents perhaps one the deepest aspects of authoritarian resilience. The 2011 riots were not erased from collective memory, but reinterpreted. Regimes have progressively emptied the emancipatory content of those events, turning them into warnings against chaos, examples of what happens when order is questioned. In doing so, they have reduced the space of political imagination, making it more difficult to conceive credible alternatives to existing power. Revolution, from a promise of change, has become a negative lesson, an experience not to be repeated. This process of symbolic rewriting is no less important than physical repression, because it acts over the long term, redefining what appears possible, desirable, or legitimate.

At the same time, the comparison between the two case studies calls for avoiding overgeneralizations. Although both countries have experienced a renewed concentration of power, the paths followed reveal significant differences in the modalities, timing, and justifications for authoritarianism. These differences suggest that resilience is not a single model; it is a set of adaptive practices that are grafted onto specific institutional and social contexts. This reinforces the idea that authoritarianism is not a static condition, but rather a constantly evolving process,

capable of taking hybrid and sometimes ambiguous forms, difficult to place along a simple dichotomy between democracy and dictatorship.

Looking beyond the cases analysed, the implications of this research extend well beyond the Arab world. The dynamics observed in Egypt and Tunisia are in dialogue with broader trends characterizing the contemporary international system: the normalization of the state of emergency, the use of digital technologies as tools for surveillance and manipulation, the crisis of democratic representation, and the growing attractiveness of authoritarian solutions presented as efficient and reassuring. In this view, the Arab Spring does not represent a regional exception, but a political laboratory through which it is possible to observe in concentrated form transformations that also affect other contexts.

This does not imply, however, that the authoritarianism that emerged after 2011 is free of contradictions or definitively consolidated. The constant need to justify power, control information, and manage social discontent indicates a latent fragility. Resilience, despite being effective, does not equal absolute stability. The same strategies that allow regimes to survive can, in the long run, spark new tensions, especially in the absence of structural responses to the economic inequalities and demands for dignity that fueled the original uprisings. In this respect, post-Arab Spring authoritarianism appears less as a definitive conclusion and more as an intermediate historical phase, the outcome of which remains open.

In conclusion, this thesis tried to shift the focus from the question “why did the Arab Spring fail?” to a broader and perhaps more uncomfortable question: how and why authoritarianism manages to survive even when it seems radically challenged. Through the comparative analysis, it emerged that this form of power does not merely resist change, but is able to appropriate it, transform it, and use it to its advantage. Understanding this adaptive capacity does not mean giving up the idea of political change, but recognizing that is more complex, discontinuous, and conflictual than one often wants to admit. As a result, the true legacy of the Arab Spring lies not only in its failed promises, but in the unresolved questions it continues to ask about the

relationship between power, crisis, and the possibility of transformation in the contemporary world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

- Agamben, G. (2005). *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Al-Khalili, C., Ansari, N., Lamrani, M., & Uzel, K. (Eds.). (2023). *Revolution Beyond the Event: The afterlives of radical politics*. UCL Press.
- Anderson, P. (1976). *Considerations on Western Marxism*. Verso Books.
- Arendt, H. (1963). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Oxford University Press.
- Boym, S. (2001). *The future of nostalgia*. Stati Uniti: Basic Books.
- Brownlee, J., Masoud, T. E., & Reynolds, A. S. (2015). *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform*.
- Chenoweth, E., Stephan, M. J. (2011). *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. Regno Unito: Columbia University Press.
- Cook, S. A. (2011). *The struggle for egypt*. Oxford University Press.
- El-Ghobashy, M. (2021). *Bread and freedom: Egypt's Revolutionary Situation*. Stati Uniti: Stanford University Press.
- Encarnación, O. G. (2008). *Spanish politics: Democracy After Dictatorship*. Polity.
- Freeland, V. (2024). *Power, patronage and international norms: A Grand Masquerade*. Cambridge University Press.
- Geddes, B., Wright, J., & Frantz, E. (2018). *How dictatorships work*. Cambridge University Press.
- Geddes, B. (2003). *Paradigms and sand castles*. University of Michigan Press.
- Gelvin, J. L. (2015). *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Regno Unito: Oxford University Press.
- Ginsburg, T., & Moustafa, T. (2008). *Rule by Law: The politics of courts in authoritarian regimes*. In *Cambridge University Press eBooks*.

- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. International Publishers Co.
- Grewal, S. (2023). *Soldiers of Democracy? Military Legacies and the Arab Spring*. Regno Unito: Oxford University Press.
- Hamid, S. (2014). *Temptations of power: Islamists and illiberal democracy in a new Middle East*. Oxford University Press.
- Hess, S. (2013). *Authoritarian landscapes: Popular Mobilization and the Institutional Sources of Resilience in Nondemocracies*. In Springer eBooks.
- Kandil, H. (2012). *Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen: Egypt's Road to Revolt*. Regno Unito: Verso.
- Ketchley, N. (2017). *Egypt in a Time of Revolution: Contentious Politics and the Arab Spring*. Stati Uniti: Cambridge University Press.
- Levitsky, S., Way, L. A. (2010). *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*. Stati Uniti: Cambridge University Press.
- Linz, J. J. (2000). *Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Lynch, M. (2016). *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*. Hachette UK.
- Mahoney, J., & Thelen, K. (2010). *Explaining institutional change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mcloughlin, C., Ali, S., Xie, K., Cheeseman, N., & Hudson, D. E. (2024). *The politics of development: Institutions, Incentives, and Ideas*. SAGE.
- Mercuri, M., & Torelli, S. M. (2012). *La primavera araba: origini ed effetti delle rivolte che stanno cambiando il Medio Oriente*. Relaz. internaz. scienza politica/ASERI.
- Mitchell, L. A. (2016). *The Democracy Promotion Paradox*. United States: Brookings Institution Press.

- O'Donnell, G., Schmitter, P. C. (2013). *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*. Stati Uniti: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Prete, A. (1992). *La nostalgia. Storia di un sentimento*. Raffaello Cortina.
- Schmitt, C. (1922). *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*. München: Duncker & Humblot.
- Slater, D. (2010). *Ordering power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tarrow, S. G. (2011). *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. Regno Unito: Cambridge University Press.
- Teti, V. (2014). *Il senso dei luoghi. Memoria e storia dei paesi abbandonati*. Donzelli.
- Thomassen, B. (2014). *Liminality and the modern: Living Through the In-Between*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Tilly, C. (2003). *The politics of collective violence*. Cambridge University Press.
- Turner, V., & Abrahams, R. D. (1969). Liminality and communitas. In *The Ritual Process* (1st ed., pp. 94–130). Routledge.
- Wedeen, L. (2015). *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Stati Uniti: University of Chicago Press.
- Wedeen, L. (2019). *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria*. Regno Unito: University of Chicago Press.
- Zizek, S. (2012). *The year of dreaming dangerously*. Verso Books.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffairs.

Book Chapters

Capoccia, G., & Kelemen, R. D. (2007). The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism. In American Political Science Association, *World Politics* (Vol. 59, Issue April, pp. 341–369). https://fas-polisci.rutgers.edu/dkelemen/research/Capoccia-Kelemen_CriticalJunctures.pdf

Khneisser, M. (2019). ‘Civil Societies’ and the Arab Uprisings-Prospects for Socio-political Change: A Comparative analysis of the on-going Tunisian and Egyptian plight. In *Springer eBooks* (pp. 11–32). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-02089-7_2

Loxton, J. (2024). ‘Authoritarian Legacies’. In *The Oxford Handbook of Authoritarian Politics*. Oxford Academic. <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/55828/chapter/454403786?login=true#no-access-message#no-access-message>

Marks, M. L. (2014). Convince, Coerce, Or Compromise? Ennahda’s Approach To Tunisia’s Constitution. In *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper* (Number 10). THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Ennahda-Approach-Tunisia-Constitution-English.pdf>

Roll, S. (2018). Managing change: how Egypt’s military leadership shaped the transformation. In *Routledge eBooks* (pp. 23–43). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315622279-2>

Scheppele, K. L., & Pozen, D. (2020). Executive overreach and underreach in the pandemic. In *Cambridge University Press eBooks* (pp. 38–53). <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108955690.003>

Wydra, H. (2015). "Liminality and Democracy," in A. Horvath, B. Thomassen, & H. Wydra (Eds.), *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*.

Journal Articles

Albrecht, H., & Bishara, D. (2011). Back on horseback: The military and political transformation in Egypt. *Middle East Law and Governance*, 3(1–2), 13–23. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187633711x591396>

- Alsaadi, S. (2023). International Competitive Involvement during Democratic Transitions and State Repression. *Comparative Politics*, 55(4), 617–638. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27219142>
- Annovi, C. (2024). Exploring conspiracist populism in power: The case of Kais Saied in Tunisia. *Genealogy*, 8(2), 43. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy8020043>
- Arena, M. D. C. P. (2024). The US and EU response to Tunisia’s democratic backsliding: promoting democracy or protecting interests? *The International Spectator*, 59(3), 158–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2024.2357172>
- Barany, Z. (2011). The role of the military. *Journal of Democracy*, 22(4), 24–35. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2011.0069>
- Bellin, E. (2012). Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring. *Comparative Politics*, 44(2), 127–149. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23211807>
- Brown, N. J. (2013). Tracking the “Arab Spring”: Egypt’s failed transition. *Journal of Democracy*, 24(4), 45–58. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2013.0064>
- Carothers, T. (2002, January 2). *The end of the transition paradigm* | *Journal of Democracy*. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-end-of-the-transition-paradigm/>
- Chakraborty, A. R. (n.d.). Liminality in Post-Colonial Theory: A Journey from Arnold van Gennep to Homi K. Bhabha. In *Anudhyan: An International Journal of Social Sciences (AIJSS)*. <https://mlkwc.ac.in/pdf/anudhyan/volume1/Liminality-in-Post-Colonial-Theory-A-Journey-from-Arnold-van-Gennep-to-Homi-K-Bhabha-Arup-Ratan-Chakraborty.pdf>
- Dobrev, S. D., Cheng, Z., & Yang, X. (2024). How Authoritarian Regimes Use Organizations to Solidify Control: A theory of pro-forma cooptation and an empirical test from reappointments to congress in China. *Organization Studies*, 45(5), 661–690. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406241233192>

- Durac, V. (2015). Social movements, protest movements and cross-ideological coalitions – the Arab uprisings re-appraised. *Democratization*, 22(2), 239–258. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1010809>
- Easton, M. R., & Siverson, R. M. (2018). The urge to purge: forecasting Erdogan's political survival following the failed coup. *Alternatives Global Local Political*, 43(4), 222–227. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375419842749>
- Erdogan, A. (2025). Unravelling the roots of state failure: Syria, Libya and Yemen. *İnsan Ve Toplum Bilimleri Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 14(1), 34–51. <https://doi.org/10.15869/itobiad.1585083>
- Foa, R.S. (2018). Modernization and Authoritarianism. *Journal of Democracy* 29(3), 129-140. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0050>
- Fong, C., Malhotra, N., & Margalit, Y. (2019). Political legacies: Understanding their significance to contemporary political debates. *PS Political Science & Politics*, 52(03), 451–456. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1049096519000209>
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Kahneman, D. (1993). Duration neglect in retrospective evaluations of affective episodes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65(1), 45–55. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.65.1.45>
- Gandhi, J., & Lust-Okar, E. (2009). Elections under authoritarianism. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 12(1), 403–422. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060106.095434>
- Ghannouchi, R. (2016). From political Islam to Muslim democracy: the Ennahda Party and the future of Tunisia. *Foreign Affairs*, 95(5), 58–67. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43946956>
- Głowacka-Grajper, M. (2018). Memory in Post-communist Europe: Controversies over Identity, Conflicts, and Nostalgia. *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 32(4), 924–935. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325418757891>

- Ha, H., Knox, C., & Janenova, S. (2024). Authoritarian and democratic states: the COVID-19 pandemic and the efficacy of public health outcomes. *Journal of Public Policy*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0143814x24000163>
- Hassib, B., & Shires, J. (2021). Manipulating Uncertainty: Cybersecurity politics in Egypt. *Journal of Cybersecurity* (Vol 7).
<https://academic.oup.com/cybersecurity/article/7/1/tyaa026/6137887>
- Hemchi, M., & Benantar, A. (2023). The 2019 Hırāk and the Arab Spring Uprisings: The Limits of the Algerian Exception Narrative? In Omran, *ArticlesArticles* (Vol. 6, Issue 2). <https://almuntaqa.dohainstitute.org/en/issue013/Documents/almuntaqa-13-2023-Hemchi-Benantar.pdf>
- Hofmann, A. (2021). The Consolidation of authoritarianism in Egypt: a systematic erosion of the rule of law. In *Rule of Law Journal* (Vols. 2–2, pp. 48–76).
<https://storage.googleapis.com/jnl-lse-j-rlj-files/journals/1/articles/31/submission/proof/31-1-57-1-10-20210726.pdf>
- Josua, M., & Edel, M. (2021). The Arab uprisings and the return of repression. *Mediterranean Politics*, 26(5), 586–611.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2021.1889298>
- Lorenzini, D. (2020). Biopolitics in the time of coronavirus. *Critical Inquiry*, 47(S2), S40–S45. <https://doi.org/10.1086/711432>
- MagShamhráin, R. (2022). The State of Exception Between Schmitt and Agamben: On Topographies of Exceptionalism and the Constitutionality of COVID Quarantine Measures (with Examples from the Irish Context). *Society*, 60(1), 93–105.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-022-00766-0>
- Peters, B. G., Pierre, J., & King, D. S. (2005). The Politics of Path Dependency: Political Conflict in Historical Institutionalism. *The Journal of Politics*, 67(4), 1275–1300. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2005.00360.x>
- Shahar, D. C. (2015). Rejecting Eco-Authoritarianism, again. *Environmental Values*, 24(3), 345–366. <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327114x13947900181996>

- Teti, A., & Gervasio, G. (2011). The Unbearable Lightness of Authoritarianism: Lessons from the Arab Uprisings. *Mediterranean Politics*, 16(2), 321–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2011.583758>
- Thomassen, B. (2017). Endnotes: Wandering in the Wilderness or Entering the Promises Land. *Middle East Critique* 26/3 (2017): 297-307. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19436149.2017.1328876>
- Thomson, S., & Ip, E. C. (2020). COVID-19 emergency measures and the impending authoritarian pandemic. *Journal of Law and the Biosciences*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.1093/jlb/ljaa064>
- Tsourapas, G. (2020). Global Autocracies: Strategies of transnational repression, legitimization, and Co-Optation in world Politics. *International Studies Review*, 23(3), 616–644. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa061>
- Verovšek, P. J. (2020). Memory, narrative, and rupture: The power of the past as a resource for political change. *Memory Studies*, 13(2), 208–222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017720256>
- Vasudeva, F. (2025). Political deification and religious populism in Modi’s India. *Populism*, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25888072-bja10073>
- Weilandt, R. (2018). Socio-economic challenges to Tunisia’s democratic transition. *European View*, 17(2), 210–217. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1781685818805681>
- Yom, S. L., & Gause, F. G. (2012). Resilient Royals: How Arab monarchies hang on. *Journal of Democracy*, 23(4), 74–88. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2012.0062>
- Zollner, B. H. E. (2019). The metamorphosis of social movements into political parties: the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the Tunisian al-Nahda as cases for a reflection on party institutionalisation theory. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 48(3), 370–387. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2019.1609413>

Online Sources

Abdelmeguid, H. (2024, April 9). *Digital repression in the Middle East: The strategic weaponization of cybercrime laws in MENA*.

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4909215

Adrian Shahbaz. (2018). The rise of digital authoritarianism. In *Freedom House*.

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/rise-digital-authoritarianism>

AfricaNews. (2024, May 29). *Egypt and China deepen cooperation during el-Sissi's visit to Beijing*. Africanews.

<https://www.africanews.com/2024/05/29/egypt-and-china-deepen-cooperation-during-el-sissis-visit-to-beijing/>

Al-Ali, Z., & Romdhane, D. B. (2014, February 16). *Tunisia's new Constitution: Progress and challenges to come*. openDemocracy.

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/tunisias-new-constitution-progress-and-challenges-to/>

Al Jazeera English. (2022, July 2). *Will Tunisia's new constitution end its political crisis? | Inside Story* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1dV-3uRh4>

Al Jazeera Centre for Studies. (2021). *The State of Exception in Tunisia:*

Background, significance and prospects | Al Jazeera Centre for Studies. Al Jazeera Centre for Studies. <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/policy-briefs/state-exception-tunisia-background-significance-and-prospects>

Al-Youm, A. (2014, June 6). *Presidential decree forbids unauthorized preachers from preaching*. Egypt Independent. https://egyptindependent.com/presidential-decree-forbids-unauthorized-preachers-preaching/?utm_source=chatgpt.com#google_vignette

Amnesty. (2018, September 29). *Egitto, Amal Fathy Condannata per aver denunciato Le Molestie Sessuali*. Amnesty International Italia.

<https://www.amnesty.it/egitto-amal-fathy-condannata-aver-denunciato-le-molestie-sessuali/>

- Amnesty International. (2025). Tunisian authorities punish mobilization for socioeconomic and environmental rights. *Amnesty International*.
https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/06/we-were-only-asking-for-our-rights-tunisian-authorities-punish-mobilization-for-socioeconomic-and-environmental-rights/?utm_source
- Anderson, L. (2023, January 30). Demystifying the Arab Spring: parsing the differences between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. *Foreign Affairs*.
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/libya/2011-04-03/demystifying-arab-spring>
- Ardovini, L. (2022, December 9). *COVID-19 in Egypt: Global Pandemics in Times of Authoritarianism* | ISPI. ISPI. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/covid-19-egypt-global-pandemics-times-authoritarianism-25653>
- BBC News. (2019, June 17). *Egypt's Mohammed Morsi: A turbulent presidency cut short*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18371427>
- Beaumont, P. (2012). Mohamed Morsi bars court challenges and orders Hosni Mubarak retrial. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/22/mohamed-morsi-mubarak-retrial-egypt>
- Bellin, E. (2013). *Drivers of Democracy: Lessons from Tunisia*.
<https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/middle-east-briefs/pdfs/1-100/meb75.pdf>
- Ben-Hassine, W. (2017, June 19). *#EgyptCensors: Evidence of recent censorship events in Egypt*. Access Now. <https://www.accessnow.org/egyptcensors-evidence-recent-censorship-events/>
- Berggruen Institute, University of Southern California, and Harvard University. (2023). *Decoding digital authoritarianism*.
<https://posada.website/publication/platform-authority-and-data-quality/Digital-Authoritarianism.pdf>

Droz-Vincent, P. (2018). *The Arab States after the Uprisings: 'Transitions,' Rebuilt Authoritarianisms and Collapsing States*. IEMed.

<https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-arab-states-after-the-uprisings-transitions-rebuilt-authoritarianisms-and-collapsing-states/>

ECPS. (n.d.). *The Elite* - ECPS. European Center for Populism Studies.

<https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/the-elite/>

Cafiero, G. (2020, February 27). Mubarak's legacy lives on in Egypt and beyond.

Responsible Statecraft. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/02/26/mubaraks-legacy-lives-on-in-egypt-and-beyond/>

Cevallos, A. (2025). *How autocrats weaponize AI — and how to fight back* | *Journal of Democracy*. Journal of Democracy. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-autocrats-weaponize-ai-and-how-to-fight-back/>

Clarke, K. (2023, May 2). *Egypt's counterrevolution and the return to tyranny*.

Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/egypts-counterrevolution-and-return-tyranny>

DFRLab. (2023, April 4). *Egyptian Twitter network amplifies pro-government hashtags, attacks fact-checkers* - DFRLab. DFRLab.

<https://dfrlab.org/2023/03/23/egyptian-twitter-network-amplifies-pro-government-hashtags-attacks-fact-checkers/>

Egypt removes 25 January, 30 June uprisings from school curriculum. Egyptian

Streets. (2017, June 19). <https://egyptianstreets.com/2017/06/19/egypt-removes-25-january-revolution-30-june-mass-protests-from-school-curriculum/>

El-Ansary, M. (2025, February 24). *Consolidating power: Tunisian President Kais Saied's crackdown on the Judiciary* - MEDC. MEDC.

<https://mideastdc.org/publication/consolidating-power-tunisian-president-kais-saieds-crackdown-on-the-judiciary/>

Fekri, A. (2020, August 28). Egyptian officials try to co-opt social media influencers, spark doubts. *The Arab Weekly*. <https://thearabweekly.com/egyptian-officials-try-co-opt-social-media-influencers-spark-doubts>

Freedom House, Repucci, S., & Slipowitz, A. (2022). The global expansion of authoritarian rule. In Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>

Gause, F. G. (2013, September 24). Kings for All Seasons: How the Middle East's monarchies survived the Arab Spring. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/kings-for-all-seasons-how-the-middle-east-monarchies-survived-the-arab-spring/>

Ghali, A., & Hanelt, C. (2024). *BTI 2024 Country Report — Tunisia*. Bertelsmann Stiftung. <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/TUN>

Gobe, E. (2024). *Kais Saied's Tunisia: A "New Republic" with Old Authoritarian Tactics*. IEMed. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/kais-saieds-tunisia-a-new-republic-with-old-authoritarian-tactics/>

Goldstone, J. A. (2011). Understanding the Revolutions of 2011: Weakness and resilience in Middle Eastern autocracies. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2011-04-14/understanding-revolutions-2011>

Guesmi, H. (2024, September 12). Presidential election in Tunisia: "Kais Saied is a new dictator, a new Ben Ali." *Le Monde.fr*. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/09/12/presidential-election-in-tunisia-kais-saied-is-a-new-dictator-a-new-ben-ali_6725758_23.html#

Hamzawy, A., & Ji, R. (2024, September 26). *Soviet and Russian policies toward Egypt: Two snapshots*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/09/egypt-russia-great-power?lang=en>

Hannoum, A. (2011, February). *On the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt*. Theory, Culture & Society | Global Public Life.

<https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/blog/abdelmajid-hannoum-on-the-revolutions-in-tunisia-and-egypt>

Heydemann, S. (2007). Upgrading authoritarianism in the Arab world. *The Saban Center at the Brookings Institution*. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/10arabworld.pdf>

Heydemann, S. (2013). *Tracking the Arab Spring Syria and the future of Authoritarianism*. *Journal of Democracy*.
<https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/tracking-the-arab-spring-syria-and-the-future-of-authoritarianism/>

Human Rights Watch. (2021). Egypt: Ending state of emergency a start but insufficient. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/26/egypt-ending-state-emergency-start-insufficient>

Human Rights Watch (2022). Egypt: Government undermining environmental groups. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/12/egypt-government-undermining-environmental-groups>

Human Rights Watch (2024). Tunisia: Deepening civil society crackdown. *Human Rights Watch*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/17/tunisia-deepening-civil-society-crackdown?utm_source

International Commission of Jurists (2023). *Tunisia: criminal trials of lawyers and politicians before military courts must stop*. ICJ Report. <https://www.icj.org/tunisia-criminal-trials-of-lawyers-and-politicians-before-military-courts-must-stop/>

ISPI. (2021, January 11). *Tunisia, Ten Years on: A Unique, Fragile Democracy*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies.
<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/tunisia-ten-years-unique-fragile-democracy-28863>

Kallmer, B. (2023, August 7). *The Putin Myth* | *Journal of Democracy*. *Journal of Democracy*. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-putin-myth/>

Ketchley, N. (2017b, July 3). How Egypt's generals used street protests to stage a coup. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/07/03/how-egypts-generals-used-street-protests-to-stage-a-coup/?>

Khelil, J. (2024, July 18). *Why Tunisia lost faith in democracy*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2024/07/tunisias-pathway-to-democracy-truth-or-fallacy?lang=en>

Kingsley, P. (2013, December 22). Egyptian court jails three secular leaders of 2011 uprising. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/22/egypt-court-jails-three-leaders-2011-uprising-6th-april-youth-movement>

Kudejira, D. (2023). *Disaster authoritarianism: An ethnography of state and NGO responses in the aftermath of tropical cyclone Idai in Chimanimani district, Zimbabwe* (thesis). Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Newfoundland. <https://research.library.mun.ca/15926/1/thesis.pdf>

Louter, L. (2022, February 3). TUNISIA: Parliamentary facing trial by military court. *Amnesty International Canada*. <https://amnesty.ca/urgent-actions/tunisia-parliamentarian-convicted-by-military-court/>

Lynch, J. (2022, June 29). *Iron net: Digital repression in the Middle East and North Africa*. European Council on Foreign Relations. https://ecfr.eu/publication/iron-net-digital-repression-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/?utm_source

Meyer, V. a. P. B. D. S. (2011, January 30). *Tunisia, Egypt, and Revolutions*. Politics Outdoors. <https://politicsoutdoors.com/2011/01/30/tunisia-egypt-and-revolutions/>

Morayef, H. (2024, May 30). *Tunisia: Authorities escalate clampdown on media, freedom of expression*. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/05/tunisia-authorities-escalate-clampdown-on-media-freedom-of-expression/>

NEWS WIRES. (2022, July 26). Tunisia constitutional referendum marked by low turnout as opposition boycotts. *France 24*.

<https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220726-tunisia-constitutional-referendum-marked-by-low-turnout-as-opposition-boycotts>

Ould Mohamedou, M.-M. (2017, September). *Reinventing Authoritarianism in the Middle East*. Global Challenges. <https://globalchallenges.ch/issue/2/reinventing-authoritarianism-middle-east/>

Pascual, J., & Gratacap, S. (2025, July 10). In Tunisia, migrants are driven out and their defenders prosecuted. *Le Monde.fr*.
https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/07/10/in-tunisia-migrants-are-driven-out-and-their-defenders-prosecuted_6743247_4.html

Pilati, K., Acconcia, G., Suber, D. L., & Chennaoui, H. (2019). Between organization and spontaneity of protests: the 2010–2011 Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings. *Social Movement Studies*, 18(4), 463–481.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2019.1567322>

Polyakova, A., & Meserole, C. (2019). Exporting digital authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese models. *DEMOCRACY & DISORDER*.
https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/FP_20190827_digital_authoritarianism_polyakova_meserole.pdf

Reporters Sans Frontières. (2022). *PRESIDENT SISI'S PUPPETS: TV Presenters used to Wage War on Journalism*. RSF.
https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/medias/file/2022/06/Rapport_Egypte2022_EN.pdf

Reporters Sans Frontières. (2022, January 19). *Un rapport à point nommé : Journalisme en Tunisie : l'heure de vérité*. RSF. <https://rsf.org/fr/un-rapport-%C3%A0-point-nomm%C3%A9-journalisme-en-tunisie-lheure-de-v%C3%A9rit%C3%A9>

Sadiki, L., Saleh, L., Ghebouli, Z. L., Fakir, I., Okyay, A. S., & Ezzamouri, A. (2024). *Tunisia in Context: Local, Regional and International Dynamics under Kais*

Saied (A. Ezzamouri & IAI - Istituto Affari Internazionali, Eds.). IAI - Istituto Affari Internazionali. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/9788893683234.pdf>

Sayigh, Y. (2019). *An Anatomy Of Egypt's Military Economy*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/files_Sayigh-Egypt_full_final2.pdf

Schäfer, I. (2015). The Tunisian Transition: Torn Between Democratic Consolidation and Neo-Conservatism in an Insecure Regional Context. *European Institute of the Mediterranean*. https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/Tunisian_Transition_EuroMeSCo_Paper_25_Isabel_Schaefer.pdf

Shakir, O. (2023). All according to plan. In *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt>

Soliman, M. (2022). *At COP27, EGYPT aims to rebuild its international standing*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/10/at-cop27-egypt-aims-to-rebuild-its-international-standing?lang=en>

Stenslie, S., & Selvik, K. (2019). Elite Survival and the Arab Spring: The cases of Tunisia and Egypt. In *Comparative social research* (pp. 17–34). <https://doi.org/10.1108/s0195-631020190000034002>

Stephen, C. (2017, November 25). The Tunisia quartet: how an impossible alliance saved the country from collapse. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/08/tunisia-quartet-arab-spring-islamist-nobel-peace-prize>

Talebi, T. (2022, February 15). *Transnational digital repression in the MENA region*. Project on Middle East Political Science. <https://pomeps.org/transnational-digital-repression-in-the-mena-region>

Teller, N. (2025, March 17). *Egypt's Gaza strategy: Ceasefire talks and a bold reconstruction plan*. The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com.

<https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-846247>

Tonstad, K. M. (2021). Politics on trial? Criminal justice and Egypt's political opposition in the aftermath of July 2013. *Oslo Law Review*, 8(1), 47–65.

<https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2387-3299-2021-01-03>

Wahba, D. (2024). Militarized governance and counterrevolutionary infrastructure in Egypt. *Current History*, 123(857), 342–346.

<https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2024.123.857.342>

Werr, P. (2024). *EU pledges billions of Euros for Egypt as it seeks to curb migration*

. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/eu-bolster-egypt-ties-with-billions-funding-2024-03-17/>

Wright, R. (2015, December 15). How the Arab Spring Became the Arab Cataclysm.

The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/arab-spring-became-arab-cataclysm>

Yerkes, S., & Muasher, M. (2017). *Tunisia's Corruption contagion: a transition at risk*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2017/10/tunisias-corruption-contagion-a-transition-at-risk?lang=en>

Yilmaz, I., Mamouri, A., Akbarzadeh, S., & Omer, M. (2025). Authoritarian Diffusion in the Cyberspace: How Egypt Learns, Emulates, and Cooperates in Digital Authoritarianism. *European Center for [Populism](#) Studies (ECPS)*.

<https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0097>

Zayed, D. (2024). *On the Margins: Civil Society Activism and Climate Change in Egypt*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/05/on-the-margins-civil-society-activism-and-climate-change-in-egypt?lang=en>

Primary Sources

Egypt 2014 Constitution - constitute. (n.d.).

https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Egypt_2014