

The Establishment of Democracy in the Countries of the Arab Spring: the role of media

The topic of this thesis is the absolutely innovative and original scheme by which the events of the Arab Spring are taking place. The Arab Spring, which concerns Middle East, Near East and North Africa Countries, aims to the establishment of democracy in the Arab world. Media have played a primary role in the organization of revolts. Many are the causes which are at the origin of the Arab Spring, such as the corruption of the authoritarian regimes which have ruled the Arab Countries for a long time, the violations of human, civil and political rights, the lack of fundamental freedoms and the extreme poverty of the populations. These people have finally realized that the cause of their poverty is neither to be found in the morphology of their desert lands, hard to cultivate, nor in their climate, characterized by low rainfall, nor in the Islamic culture, nor in the adoption of wrong economic strategies in the past. Such a cause has to be found in the modality of exercise of power. In fact, Arab nations are poor precisely because they have been ruled by a narrow elite that has organized society for its own benefit at the expense of the vast mass of people. Political power has been narrowly concentrated, and has been used to create great wealth for those who possess it, such as the \$70 billion fortune apparently accumulated by ex-president of Egypt Mubarak. The Egyptian people have been the actual losers.

Arab Spring started on the 17th of December 2010, when the Tunisian peddler Mohammad Bouazizi set himself on fire in order to protest against Ben Ali's regime. Then, a domino effect started in all the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, people got off the streets every day, organized pacific protests and bravely faced clashes against law enforcement, never giving up. Since that day, the situation has greatly changed and many achievements have been reached and some of the Arab Countries are currently crossing the phase of the democratic transition (recognition of civil and political rights and the first free, competitive and fair elections), which begins with the fall of the authoritarian regimes and is followed by the definitive democratic establishment (the construction and then the consolidation of the democratic state institutions). Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have been

the most striking examples so far. In Tunisia the dictator Ben Ali was forced to flee on the 14th of December 2011 and to shelter in Saudi Arabia. In Egypt the ancient Mubarak capitulated, after thirty years of government, because of the pressing claims of his people and the protests in Tahrir Square, now the symbol of the Egyptian revolution. In Libya the colonel Gaddafi, accused of genocide and crimes against humanity, was killed, after a long and bloody conflict, on the 20th October 2011, by the rebel forces supported by NATO troops, after a military intervention authorized by a UN resolution.

The American political scientist Dahl configures three different paths towards the establishment of democracy: the grant of civil rights (competition) can precede the grant of political rights (inclusivity), the grant of political rights can precede the grant of civil rights, the grant of civil rights can go hand in hand with the grant of political rights.

The first chapter of this thesis is about all the political and non-political conditions favorable to democracy that Morlino and other influential political scientists have identified:

- There would be a direct relation between democratic structure and level of economic development (industrialization, urbanization and growth of per capita income). This correlation can occur in three different ways: democracy produces economic development, economic development produces democracy, democracy and economic development go hand in hand.
- Jewish-Christian religion would promote democracy, while Islamic religion would deter it (because Islamic religion does not separate the religious sphere and the political sphere and the contents of Sharia, the Islamic religious law, could not be applied to a democratic system).
- The presence of cultural factors such as civic culture (that is to say participation, lively political activity, moderated civil commitment), belief in freedom, respect of laws, willingness to participate, opening to compromise, negotiation and tolerance, willingness to

cooperate without excluding the possibility of competition and mutual trust between the actors of a political system would favor democracy.

- Political and social pluralism, but not cultural pluralism, would encourage the establishment of a democratic regime.
- The longer the period of the previous authoritarian regime, the harder the birth of democracy, because of stronger authoritarian traditions and inheritance.
- The presence of an international opinion favorable or adverse to the spread of democracy could be decisive.
- There would be a negative relation, known as “the oil curse”, between the economic dependence on natural resources (above all on oil) and democratic structure.
- Other factors (national unity, high literacy rate and high level of education, spread and development of mass media, absence of extreme economic inequalities, good organization of opposition during the previous dictatorial regime).

The events occurring in the Arab region will demonstrate the veracity of these theories or will disprove them.

The second chapter of this thesis aims to analyze in detail one of the aforesaid conditions favorable to democracy: the use of media, the newer and the older ones.

But freedom of information is one of the worst enemies of dictatorships, whose favorite weapon is censorship. In fact, even if most of Arab Constitutions contain articles about freedom of expression, freedom of the press and freedom of information, these freedoms were not effective and the constitutional provisions were continuously violated. But during 2011 and the first months of 2012 things have changed a lot and the situation is in turmoil, as demonstrated by the reports realized by Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders, two non-governmental organizations. The thesis analyze the data provided by these NGO: changes are evident above all in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya (which was between the ten less free countries in the world according to the report of Freedom

House of 2010), which have shifted from the status of “not free” to the status of “partly free”. This great breakthrough has been made possible thanks to the popular protests and the fall of dictatorial regimes with the consequent demolition of their censorship systems. Now, what is really important, but also really hard to do, is to create democratic institutions to consolidate the conquered freedom and to avoid the influence of political authorities from the old regimes. Even if the level of freedom of the press in the MENA region has been mainly improved since last year, there are also some Countries, such as Syria and Bahrain , where the dictators continue to impede the spread of news regarding the Arab Spring and of objective information, continue to imprison, torture and even kill journalists and bloggers who are against the regime, continue to directly control most of journals and televisions and radios, continue to block access to internet, continue to promulgate stricter and stricter laws, continue to prohibit the entrance of foreign journalists in the Countries. The worsening in the freedom of expression in Syria and Bahrain reflects the alarmed reactions of the dictators who have been scared by the protests asking for greater freedom of media. For the same reason, the freedom of the net in 2010 has witnessed severe restrictions. A lot of social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and many blogs were inaccessible and illegal. But during last months everything has changed and social media have played a primary role in mobilizing protests and spreading news of revolts. The third chapter of the thesis examines this important role.

Western media also refer to the Arab Spring with the expressions “Facebook Revolution” or “Twitter Revolutions”. Social media have certainly helped to speed up what could have been a very long revolution and have facilitated the spread of revolutionary ideas. And, thanks to the contagious effect of social networks, young Arabs have been able to intercept the widespread social malaise and to turn it into political revolution. As Simon Sibilio noted, there is an equation between the increase in the rate of Internet penetration and a growing democratization of Arab society, and that is the reason why governments have strengthen censorship. It was the beginning of the “social war” between regimes and protesters, between hackers, who are just simple citizens, and cyber-soldiers

in support of regimes. The web population (the so-called “netizens”) has dramatically grown during the last period in the MENA Countries (it does not sound very strange because 53% of Arab population is made up by people who are under 25) and writing or reading blogs and using social-networks and reading news on the web are the favourite activities between young Arab activists. During 2011, the number of Facebook users has almost tripled (it shifted from 16 million users to 45 million users) and the number of Twitter users has doubled. As Clay Shirky observes, social media can enormously reduce coordination costs. In many cases, social networks have been the only source of information, when the commitment of journalists was impeded by the governments. The “citizen journalism” was born and, even if sometimes it reported fake news, it was the main source of information during the civil war in Libya and in Syria, where brave citizens have used their mobile phones and their cameras to film what was happening and to show the whole world the Arab Spring. Without these means of communication, Western world would be almost unaware of one of the biggest changes in history of last century. The videos released by the “citizen journalists” have been posted on YouTube, but also broadcast on international televisions: these are the cases of the videos of dying Gaddafi, of the crowd in Tahrir Square in Egypt, of the bombings in Syria.

Between the new media, blogs are media of primary importance: they are simple to use and people can have access even without a registration, people can use them in order to write something or just to read what someone else wrote. There are more than 40,000 active Arab blogs and at present the most discussed theme is politics.

It is important to not forget the role of traditional media, such as televisions and radio, in the Arab Spring. The broadcast images of the events in Tunisia have certainly contributed to the birth of a spirit of emulation in Egypt, and subsequently in the other Arab Countries, thus speeding up the organization of protests in the whole Arab world and rousing a powerful domino effect. Some news channels experienced a significant increase in viewership in 2011, with Arabs all over the world

glued to their TV screens watching the historic events in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Syria unfold. The trend has continued into 2012, with news being rated as the most preferred genre of programming in the MENA region. Al-Jazeera is the most popular news channel in the region, with 68% share. Even radios have proved an important mean of communication thanks to their easy usage and to the liberalization of the sector, followed by a great increase in number of private radios.

The role of social media in the Arab Spring has been crucial, but it has not to be overrated because the revolution has been made not by tools, but by people. Social media have been useful tools, but not essential tools. They are not the cause of the revolution. The journalist Shadid wrote on his Twitter page: «It's not a Twitter or Facebook revolution. The revolution is in the streets, and it smells of blood». The real revolution happened offline, thanks to brave people who jeopardized everyday their life in order to be free and live in a democratic Country. Social media create just weak bonds between people and they require a minimum of participation, without further efforts. As Malcolm Gladwell wrote on *The New Yorker*: «People with a grievance will always find ways to communicate with each other. How they choose to do it is less interesting, in the end, than why they were driven to do it in the first place».

Finally, this thesis discusses the problem whether the Arab Spring can be considered a revolution or just a revolt. The difference between the two terms is relevant: a “revolt” is just an ephemeral upheaval of protest, a “revolution” is a total reversal of the whole system, not just a political change of regime. It is not easy to draw a conclusion because the Arab Spring is a phenomenon still in progress. In this moment it would be a risky choice to define the Arab Spring a revolution: protests turned into a civil war in Libya and Syria, opposition parties regained momentum, the military forces ruled for shorter or longer periods. But these crises cannot be considered as definitive failures of the democratization process because a revolution, and such deep and systematic changes, require a long long time. What is important to do is to not limit our horizon in the short term, since the long

term can bring major changes. Maybe Arab Spring will be something more than just a revolt. The statement pronounced by UN Special Representative for Libya, Ian Martin, is emblematic: «Much work lies ahead to consolidate and build on what has been accomplished. This requires all Libyans, political leaders and civil society to join hands to chart the future of their Country. At this moment of peaceful, democratic transition to new authorities, Libyans can take huge pride in what has been accomplished». The game is still open, then.