

Societies and Political Orders in Transition

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# Handbook of Revolutions in the 21st Century

The New Waves of Revolutions, and  
the Causes and Effects of Disruptive  
Political Change

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# The Arab Spring: Causes, Conditions, and Driving Forces



Leonid Grinin and Andrey Korotayev

## 1 Introduction: Events of Special Importance?

The Arab world (and the MENA region in general) tends to be perceived as a zone of instability where various wars, violent conflicts, and other upheavals are likely.<sup>1</sup> The protests and revolutions of 2011, known as the “Arab Spring,” fit quite well into the stormy history of this region (e.g., Grinin & Korotayev, 2016a, 2016b; Korotayev et al., 2016). However, from the 1980s, the region had seemed to settle into a period of stable authoritarianism.

After decades of political hibernation (Gardner, 2011), one could hardly fail to be impressed by the unexpectedness and energy of the social explosion, the enormous geographic scope of the Arab Spring “from the Ocean to the Gulf” (e.g., Mirskiy, 2011), the synchronicity of the “color revolutions” and social protests, and the prevalence in 2011 of sociopolitical (rather than interethnic or interconfessional) motifs. The upheavals and protests involved more than a dozen Arab countries, including

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<sup>1</sup>On the revolutionary events in the MENA region in the 1950s–1990s see Chapter “[Revolutionary Waves and Lines of the Twentieth Century](#)” (Grinin & Grinin, 2022, in this volume).

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some in the Gulf. Large-scale social explosions and revolutions were observed in six countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain).<sup>2</sup> In three countries, they led to lengthy civil wars (Syria, Libya and Yemen). In addition, in 2011 most of the other Arab countries (and many of their neighbors) experienced a considerable degree of sociopolitical destabilization.<sup>3</sup>

What is important is that those events appear to have some features that are definitely new in comparison with earlier events in the Middle East and North Africa. We no longer can hold an impression that the Arabs are only capable of waging anticolonial liberation wars, military coups, rebellions “under the green banner of Islam” (Mirskiy, 2011), or developing Islamist movements of different versions. Gil Yaron (2011: 38), a journalist, expressed this with the following words: “Finally, history is being made in the Middle East.” The article went on to say: “Thomas Friedman, one of the most influential American political commentators, maintained not long ago that the Arab Middle East had not been a place where History was made for more than a century. Up to the early twenty-first century the Arab countries were dominated by feudal structures that suppressed all ideological novelties.<sup>4</sup> However, since the start of revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt this defect has been mended. In early 2011 there was no lack of facts indicating that History was being made in the Middle East” (Yaron, 2011: 38). Thus, it is hardly surprising that the number of studies of the Arab Spring is very large, and this number continues to grow (e.g., Acemoglu et al., 2017; Al-Hasan et al., 2018; Alpher, 2019; Anderson, 2011; Arampatzi et al., 2018; Aras & Keyman, 2018; Beck, 2014; Gause, 2011; Goldstone 2011a, 2011b; Bellin, 2012; Brynen et al., 2012; Cammett, 2018; Campante & Chor, 2012; Dabashi, 2012; Davis, 2016; Devarajan & Ianchovichina, 2018; Haas, 2018; Haas & Lesch, 2017; Hehir, 2016; Hermida et al., 2014; Hodler, 2018; Lawson, 2015; Levin et al., 2018; Massoud et al., 2019; Moghadam, 2018; Rougier, 2016; Schumacher & Schraeder, 2021; Solomon, 2018).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more detail see Chapters “The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and the Birth of the Arab Spring Uprisings” (Kuznetsov, 2022), “Egypt’s 2011 Revolution. A Demographic Structural Analysis” (Korotayev & Zinkina, 2022), “The Syrian Revolution” (Akhmedov, 2022), “Revolution in Libya” (Barmin, 2022), and “The Arab Spring in Yemen” (Issaev et al., 2022) in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Goldstone (2011a, 2011b), Beck (2011), Grinin and Korotayev (2011, 2012a, 2012b), Brynen et al. (2012), Weyland (2012), Holmes (2012), Howard and Hussain (2013), Wilson (2013), Korotayev et al. (2013, 2014), Lang and Sterck (2014), Beissinger et al. (2015), Sumiala and Korpiola (2017) etc.; see also Chapter “Introduction. Changing yet Persistent: Revolutions and Revolutionary Events” (Goldstone et al., 2022b, in this volume).

<sup>4</sup> Of course, this is an exaggeration, especially in relation to countries such as Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, etc. This shows the level of understanding of Islamic countries, as well as Islamist movements on the part of the media.

<sup>5</sup> Some of the abovementioned works (see especially Lawson, 2015) regard the Arab Spring revolutions as a wave of revolutions. In this chapter we do not concentrate on this aspect, because we analyze character, causes and particularities of this revolutionary wave in Chapters “Introduction. Changing yet Persistent: Revolutions and Revolutionary Events” (Goldstone et al., 2022b), “On Revolutionary Waves Since the Sixteenth Century” (Grinin, 2022f), and “Revolutions of the 21st Century as a Factor in the World System Reconfiguration” (Grinin, 2022e) in this volume.

## 2 Revolutions: Causes, Regularities, Conditions, and Driving Forces

An analysis of theories of revolution (and sociopolitical destabilization in general) goes outside the scope of this chapter [for this analysis see Chapters “[The Phenomenon and Theories of Revolution](#)” (Goldstone et al., 2022c) and “[On Revolutionary Situations, Stages of Revolution, and Some Other Aspects of the Theory of Revolution](#)” (Grinin, 2022b, in this volume); see also, e.g., Bilyuga et al., 2016; Goldstone, 2001; Grinin, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019b; Grinin & Korotayev, 2015, 2016b; Grinin et al., 2010, 2014a, 2017; Korotayev, 2014; Korotayev et al., 2011, 2014, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018a, 2018c, 2020, 2021; Lawson, 2016, 2019; Romanov et al., 2021; Sztompka, 1993: 302–305; Tsirel, 2012a<sup>6</sup>]. At this point let us recollect that in this chapter (as well as in this book as a whole<sup>7</sup>) we rely on such definitions of revolution as “a revolution is a collective mobilization that attempts to quickly and forcibly overthrow an existing regime in order to transform political, economic, and symbolic relations” (Lawson, 2019: 5); “any and all instances in which a state or a political regime is overthrown and thereby transformed by a popular movement in an irregular, extraconstitutional and/or violent fashion” (Goodwin, 2001: 9); “anti-government (very often illegal) mass actions (mass mobilization) with the following aims: (1) to overthrow or replace the existing government within a certain period of time; (2) to seize power or to provide conditions for coming to power; (3) to make significant changes in the regime, social or political institutions” (Grinin & Korotayev, 2020a: 856); “an effort to transform the political institutions and the justifications for political authority in a society, accompanied by formal or informal mass mobilization and noninstitutionalized actions that undermine existing authorities” (Goldstone, 2001: 142).

As one could see, some of the Arab Spring events (especially in Egypt and Tunisia) fit such definitions rather well. The wave of Arab revolutions, revolts, and rebellions (as well as any other similar major unexpectedly starting events) are produced by complex and unique combinations of numerous (objective and subjective, exogenous and endogenous, social and personal) factors. Note that disputes on the causes of such events may continue for centuries [Plato and Aristotle argued over the causes of revolution, or *metabolê*; see also, e.g., Grinin et al., 2010, 2016]. However, it is

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<sup>6</sup> See also Chapters “[On Theories and Phenomenon of Revolution](#)” (Goldstone et al., 2022c) and “[On Revolutionary Situations, Stages of Revolution, and Some Other Aspects of the Theory of Revolution](#)” (Grinin, 2022b) in this volume.

<sup>7</sup> See in particular Chapters “[Introduction. Changing yet Persistent: Revolutions and Revolutionary Events](#)” (Goldstone et al., 2022b) and “[The Phenomenon and Theories of Revolution](#)” (Goldstone et al., 2022c) in this book.

useful to try to systematize such factors.<sup>8</sup> We begin by analyzing the division of factors into internal and external (and, especially, global, world-system ones). It also appears important to consider that the same factors could act as both endogenous and exogenous forces and that global causes may lead to very different outcomes in different social systems.

Below we shall try to single out a few conditions that were observed as regards the Arab (and many other) revolutions (see also Grinin et al., 2019: Chap. 5):

1. We start by examining some structural societal features that, when they arise, generate serious economic and social problems. For example, in Russia before the Revolution of 1917 fast demographic growth in conjunction with the strong village community generated an acute deficit of arable land. With respect to the Arab countries a salient role appears to have been played by certain demographic structural factors, like the one of the “youth bulge” (see, e.g., Grinin, 2011; Grinin & Korotayev 2012a, 2012b; Korotayev, 2014; Korotayev & Zinkina, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d; Korotayev et al., 2011, 2014; LaGraffe, 2012; Malik & Awadallah, 2013; Mirkin, 2013).

Many researchers regard the rapid growth of the youth share in the population to be a major factor of political instability [see Chapter “[Egypt’s 2011 Revolution. A Demographic Structural Analysis](#)” (Korotayev & Zinkina, 2022, in this volume) for more detail]. The role of this factor may be strengthened by economic and distribution disproportions, by certain structural political factors which we shall discuss in more detail below—e.g., “hybrid” political regimes that are neither consistently democratic, nor consistently authoritarian; or non-monarchic political systems where one person remains in power for a critically long period, and so on. A certain role may be played by disproportions in the education systems [for example, in Egypt, this led to a particularly high proportion of unemployed with university degrees—see Chapter “[Egypt’s 2011 Revolution. A Demographic Structural Analysis](#)” (Korotayev & Zinkina, 2022, in this volume)].

There is another such aspect connected with societal modernization. The point is that modernizing societies systematically “overgrow” older forms, and its members seek to acquire new forms even if their respective social systems are not ready for them [whereas this readiness (or unpreparedness) often only becomes clear in retrospect]. As a result, modernizing systems frequently find themselves in a sort of “modernization trap”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Chapters “[On Theories and Phenomenon of Revolution](#)” (Goldstone et al., 2022c), “[Conclusion. Why have so Many Revolutions Occurred in Recent Years, and are They Likely to Continue to Occur in the Future?](#)” (Goldstone et al., 2022a), “[On revolutionary situations, stages of revolution, and some other aspects of the theory of revolution](#)” (Grinin, 2022b), “[Revolutions of the 21st Century as a Factor in the World System Reconfiguration](#)” (Grinin, 2022e), and “[The ‘Color’ Revolutions. Successes and limitations of Non-violent Protest](#)” (Mitchell, 2022) in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Grinin and Korotayev (2012a). On the connection between modernization [even when it proceeds successfully] and revolution see Chapters “[Revolutions and Historical Process](#)” (Grinin, 2022), “[Revolution and Modernization Traps](#)” (Grinin, 2022d), and “[The European Revolutions and Revolutionary Waves of the Nineteenth Century: Their Causes and Consequences](#)” (Grinin,

2. Regime rigidity. Revolutions do not happen within consolidated democratic political systems.<sup>10</sup> Revolutions are directed against rigid regimes that try to control everything (and, thus, appear to be responsible for everything). Consequently, everything wrong, whether actual or imagined, starts being ascribed to those regimes and their leaders. Any regime has certain defects resulting from the features of its peculiar institutions and personalities. In particular, the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world had certain defects that are typical for almost all authoritarian regimes of the world: corruption, abuse of power by security forces, absence of truly independent courts of law, falsified elections, and so on. It appears almost impossible to eliminate such defects within such systems, especially as they are based on the regime of personal power of a certain political leader, even when the government understands the presence of those defects (see also Grinin et al., 2019: Chap. 5).
3. Decline of governmental authority and intermediate or transitional political structures. In the course of time one frequently observes among people an accumulation of resentments caused by corruption, the economic and/or political preponderance of certain clans and cliques, breaches of justice, nepotism, a growing impossibility to realize one's life plans, etc. This resentment is never without some substantial grounds. For example, with respect to Egypt, in addition to the aforesaid problems, one may mention that the decades-long State of Emergency created a situation of uncontrolled activities of the security forces, which led to massive use of torture against those opposed to the regime; one may also mention a particularly high level of falsification of results that was recorded for the parliamentary elections that took place in Egypt just two months before the revolution. When social peace and order are based on the power of a specific person rather than institutions (which is typical for authoritarian regimes and dictatorships), the decline of governmental authority below a certain level may make a regime unstable. Thus, social protests could easily topple a personalist regime that loses elite support (especially, against the backdrop of intra-elite conflict). Note that in the absence of sufficient internal cohesion this may lead to a disintegration of the state.

The preconditions of revolutions are almost always connected with the growth of dissatisfaction with authorities, on the one hand, and with the weakness (confusion, indecision) of the authorities, on the other. This is one of the most important features of the revolutionary situation [for an analysis of such situations see, e.g., Goldstone, 2014b; Grinin, 2017a; see also Chapter “[Revolution and Modernization Traps](#)” (Grinin, 2022d, in this volume)]. And what is important is that the longer the rule of an authoritarian leader, the more likely the loss of authority. As is noted by Sorokin (1992: 278), when the halo of authority evaporates, the population develops significant doubts as to whether the preservation of the regime makes sense. Note that the Arab Spring has provided

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2022g) in this volume; see also Grinin 2011, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2014, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019b; Korotayev, 2014; Korotayev et al., 2011, 2014, 2020, 2021].

<sup>10</sup> About the correlation between revolutions and democracy see Chapters “[Revolutions, Counter-revolutions, and Democracy](#)” (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022) and “[Conclusion. Why have so Many Revolutions Occurred in Recent Years, and are They Likely to Continue to Occur in the Future?](#)” (Goldstone et al., 2022a) in this book.

additional evidence in support of the finding reported in the *State Failure Task Force Report* (Goldstone et al., 2000: vii–viii, 18–25) that the non-monarchic regimes with political leaders staying in power for very long periods (more than 14 years) are more unstable. Indeed, all the heads of the Arab states that lost their power as a result of the Arab Spring events (in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen) had stayed in power longer than the period indicated by Goldstone and his colleagues.<sup>11</sup> In general, one can hardly ignore the fact that the restriction of the rule of the head of state by two terms that is found in most present-day democracies looks like a rather successful evolutionary finding that appears to be rather congruent with human political psychology (after two terms more and more people tend to “feel tired” even with a very effective political leader, and after 14 years this may reach a critical level).

Note also that the analysis of correlates of political instability performed by the State Failure Task Force through a multiple regression analysis indicates that the highest risks of political destabilization are observed with respect to hybrid regimes (that is, those political regimes that combine certain features of autocracies and democracies), whereas both consistently authoritarian and consistently democratic regimes are characterized by a much higher degree of stability [see Goldstone et al., 2000: vii–viii, 18–25; see also Gurr, 1974; Gates et al., 2000; Goldstone, 2014b; Goldstone et al., 2010; Grinin et al., 2016; Korotayev et al., 2013, 2015, 2016; Malkov et al., 2013; Mansfield & Snyder, 1995; Marshall & Cole, 2008, 2012; Slinko et al., 2017; Ulfelder & Lustik, 2007, as well as Chapters “Revolutions, Counterrevolutions, and Democracy” (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022) and “Conclusion. Why have so Many Revolutions Occurred in Recent Years, and are They Likely to Continue to Occur in the Future?” (Goldstone et al., 2022a) in this book].

This regularity has become especially salient in the present-day rapidly globalizing world. The point is that, with respect to the present-day non-monarchic modernized societies, democracy is the only accepted (practically without any realistic alternatives) mode of political power legitimization (see, e.g., Furman, 2010: 21; Tsirel, 2012b). This is important from the point of view of both internal and external legitimization (whereas the latter might be more important for a regime when it is stable, however, in the case of a sociopolitical explosion the former, naturally, becomes much more important). The Arab Spring events have demonstrated again that the traditional monarchic mode of legitimization still remains rather effective (see, e.g., Korotayev & Khokhlova, 2022), but in the present-day world it can hardly be returned to those countries where it had been abolished some time ago (however, generally speaking, the constitutional monarchy looks like the most effective and bloodless version of an intermediate phase of democratic transformation). In any case, in the present-day world even the most authoritarian (but non-monarchic) regimes have to use for their legitimization some formally democratic procedures (note, by the way, that even the most consistently authoritarian regime of the present day still positions itself as

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Ali Abdullah Saleh was in power in Yemen for 34 years; Hosni Mubarak in Egypt was for 30 years, Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya was for 42 years, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia was for 24 years.

“the Korean *Democratic* People’s Republic” and that even China’s Communist Party seeks legitimacy from a National People’s Congress).<sup>12</sup>

Thus, from time to time most non-monarchic authoritarian regimes, in order to bolster their claim to legitimacy, have to conduct elections, which by definition are performed with certain violations of democratic procedures<sup>13</sup> (including direct falsifications of election results). The hybrid political regimes tend to have certain civil society institutions. For example, in Egypt under President Mubarak there were a few legal or semi-legal parties and movements, some more or less independent media, a considerable number of NGOs—including even ones concerned with, say, human rights, numerous Internet networks, and so on (e.g., Montada, 2016). The presence of such civil society institutions tends to hamper falsifications of election results, as they help both to detect such falsifications and to diffuse the information on them through independent media (of course, in the present-day world this is first of all the Internet). As a result, within such a context any new elections tend to be accompanied by more and more serious protests. In addition, social networks make it possible to organize specific mass actions of protest [see, e.g., AlSayyad & Guvenc, 2015; Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Hänska Ahy, 2016; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Khondker, 2011; Schroeder et al., 2012; Steinert-Threlkeld, 2017; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013].<sup>14</sup>

Yet, by 2011, in the countries in question only a minority of the population could join such networks (and a very large part of this minority was constituted by rather well-to-do representatives of the middle class). However, as the experience of recent years clearly indicates, these are just those people who tend to react in the most negative way with respect to the facts of salient falsifications of election results; these are just the people who are ready to act as a vanguard of protest movements. Such protest movements may get an especially wide sweep in those modernizing countries that have an especially high proportion of youths in their population [the above mentioned “youth bulge” (see, e.g., Goldstone, 2002)]. As we shall see below, these were the demographic structural characteristics of the Arab countries.

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<sup>12</sup> Incidentally, in most modern revolutions (with the exception, perhaps, of some revolutions led by communist, ultra-right, or radical Islamist leaders), the demand for freedom and democracy occupies an important, if not the most important, place. And even during the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1978–1979 at least part of the revolutionary forces opposed the authoritarian monarchy and fought for freedom and democracy. For detail on the Iranian revolution see Chapters “Two instances of Islamic “revival”: The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the formation of the “Islamic State” in Syria and Iraq in the 2010s” (Filin et al., 2022a) and “Revolutionary Waves and Lines of the Twentieth Century” (Grinin & Grinin, 2022) in this book.

<sup>13</sup> This is just by definition, as otherwise such regimes would be classified as democratic.

<sup>14</sup> We can see very obvious cases when impressions that elections were rigged triggered revolutions. See Chapters “The ‘Color’ Revolutions. Successes and Limitations of Non-violent Protest” (Mitchell, 2022), “The Bulldozer Revolution in Serbia” (Khodunov, 2022a), “The Rose Revolution in Georgia” (Khodunov, 2022), “The Orange Revolution in Ukraine” (Khodunov, 2022b), “Serbian ‘Otpor’ and the Color Revolutions’ Diffusion” (Filin et al., 2022b), and “Color Revolutions in Kyrgyzstan” (Ivanov, 2022) in this book.

4. Ideological preconditions. Essentially, most revolutions are produced by a combination of protest moods, discontent, hatred, the desire to shift the burden of responsibility for difficulties and hardships onto the government (with which you are completely fed up), on the one hand, and by strong aspiration for new ideas, ideals, relations, etc.—on the other. Revolutions are hardly possible in those social systems where nobody seeks to change them. They are hardly possible in those systems that lack appropriate ideologies, and idealized models of a better life (in such systems one would rather expect riots, mutinies, and so on).

Thus, the genesis of revolution needs serious grievances against the government, inflated expectations and the conviction that it would be possible to make life better, more just, more honest if this were not hampered by the bad (corrupted, criminal, antinational, etc.) government. It is evident that the post-revolution reality tends to correspond very little to pre-revolution expectations; however, this only becomes clear after the victory of the revolution. Inflated expectations (generated in part by the orientation toward more developed countries) create ideological grounds for protests and anti-governmental actions.

### 3 On External and Internal Factors Contributing to the Revolution

Often the question arises about the influence of foreign forces on the revolutions in the Middle East. In some respects, these influences can be traced very clearly.<sup>15</sup> But it is important to understand that revolutions are never determined solely by external influence; they are always the result of an internal crisis [for the reasons and conditions for such a crisis in relation to a number of Middle Eastern countries, see, e.g., Goldstone, 2011a, 2014a; Grinin & Korotayev, 2012b, 2014, 2016a; Grinin et al., 2016; Korotayev et al., 2013; Korotayev et al., 2014]. The role of external factors, moreover, is significantly different from country to country, depending on its level of development and features. If revolutions in such states as Egypt and Tunisia were rooted in internal economic and political conflicts, then in a number of other Arab countries, the upheavals were caused by the fact that internal ethno-religious and tribal divisions were spurred into motion. These ethno-religious and tribal divisions in certain Arab countries never really disappeared and gained momentum due to a whole set of factors that included, in addition to the social discontent, the example of other countries, the inspiration of nearby protests and active help from outside. We see this

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<sup>15</sup> See Chapters “Evolution and Typology of Revolutions” (Grinin, 2022a), “On Revolutionary Situations, Stages of Revolution, and Some Other Aspects of the Theory of Revolution” (Grinin, 2022b), “Revolutions and Historical Process” (Grinin, 2022c), “Revolutions of the 21st Century as a Factor in the World System Reconfiguration” (Grinin, 2022e), and “The ‘Color’ Revolutions. Successes and Limitations of Non-violent Protest” (Mitchell, 2022) in this book; see also, e.g., Grinin et al. (2016).

in Libya, Yemen, and Syria, where external military intervention unleashed a knot of ethno-confessional hostilities [see Chapters “[The Syrian Revolution](#)” (Akhmedov, 2022), “[Revolution in Libya](#)” (Barmin, 2022), and “[The Arab Spring in Yemen](#)” (Issaev et al., 2022) in this book]. The latter were only restrained by sufficiently strong authoritarian regimes. And it was only necessary to overthrow or weaken those regimes in order for chaos to begin in these countries.

We consider it necessary to re-emphasize what we noted before: for countries lacking a strong statehood, and with low values of Human Development Index, the idea of revolution is extremely dangerous and can lead to serious destabilization [see Chapter “[Revolutions, Counterrevolutions, and Democracy](#)” (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022, in this volume), as well as Grinin et al., 2016; Grinin et al., 2019].

One of the main opportunities for a revolution is the absence of clear mechanisms for the transfer of power within authoritarian regimes. Proceeding from the essence of any authoritarian regime, the transfer of power must follow the classical or Byzantine monarchical principle (to the son or relative or to the appointed successor). However, in modern conditions such attempts obviously contradict the declared principles of democracy. Thus, democratic ideas come into collision with the need for stability; as a result, the process by which power is transferred in authoritarian regimes becomes their vulnerable point.

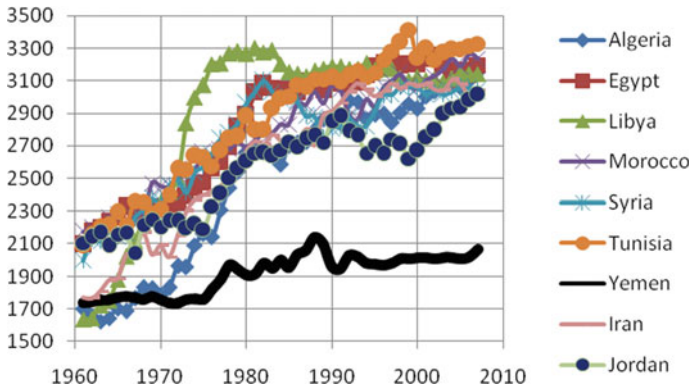
The countries in which the consequences of the Arab Spring have turned out to be the most damaging are predominantly non-monarchies with poorly developed traditions of statehood. This is aggravated by the fact that modern borders have not yet had time to gain a foothold. It is not surprising that in these countries the ruling regimes tried to compensate for the weakness of statehood by quasi-monarchist attempts (Syria, Yemen, and Libya). That is, attempts to transfer power in one way or another by inheritance. This took place even in Egypt, in an attempt to transfer power from Hosni Mubarak to his son Gamal.

## 4 Notes About Causes of the Arab Revolutions

*Famine, Inflated Expectations, Corruption, or Yearning for Freedom?* Some analysts suggest as a major cause of the Arab revolutions extreme deprivation and mass poverty caused by economic stagnation, catastrophic unemployment and food price growth (Al-Arabiya, 2011; al-Lawati, 2011; Stangler & Litan, 2011). The self-immolation acts seem to confirm this. Nevertheless, it appears wrong to interpret events that took place in Egypt, Tunisia, or Bahrain (and, in the Arab countries in general, with some exception of Yemen where the average per capita food consumption did not reach the level recommended by the World Health Organization<sup>16</sup>) as “revolutions of the hungry”. If we take Egypt as an example, we will see that the

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<sup>16</sup> However, even in Yemen one could not observe any substantial trend of declining living standards in the pre-Arab-Spring period; Hence, even with respect to Yemen, such an explanation does not look convincing at all.



**Fig. 1** Food consumption dynamics, kcal per capita per day, 1961–2007 (FAO, 2017b)

percentage of Egyptians who lived at less than one dollar per capita per day (the UN defined level of abject poverty) was at the eve of the revolution extremely low, even compared with the one found in the most developed countries, like the USA or UK [see, e.g., Chapter “[Egypt’s 2011 Revolution. A Demographic Structural Analysis](#)” (Korotayev & Zinkina, 2022, in this volume), as well as Korotayev & Zinkina, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c].

The point that the Arab Spring was in no way a “revolution of the hungry” is supported by data on the dynamics of per capita food consumption in the Middle Eastern countries since 1961 (see Fig. 1). As we see, still in the early 1960s the level of per capita food consumption in all the countries represented in the diagram was below the level recommended by the World Health Organization (2300 kcal per capita per day), whereas in such countries as Iran, Yemen, or Algeria it was critically low. However, in the 1960s and 1970s almost all the countries represented in the diagram achieved impressive results, and already in the early 1980s the level of food consumption in some of them (for example, in Egypt and Syria) exceeded 3000 kcal per capita per day—that is actually the level of clear overeating.<sup>17</sup>

This is convincingly confirmed by the map in Fig. 2, compiled by the World Food Programme. It is very remarkable that all of the Arab Spring countries (with the single

<sup>17</sup> To understand how false is the fashionable interpretation of the Arab Spring as “a revolution of the hungry”, it appears appropriate to mention that the percentage of obesity among the Egyptians by the start of the Arab Spring was one of the highest in the world (e.g., Korotayev & Zinkina, 2011a, 2011b; Martorell et al., 2000). According to Egyptian Demographic and Health Survey (conducted in 2008), 40% of Egyptian women and 18% of men were overweight because of overeating (Egypt Ministry of Health et al., 2009). According to a bit more recent data, these figures equal 22% for males and 48% for females just by the beginning of the protests under a hypocritical slogan “Bread, Freedom, Social Justice!” (Badran & Laher, 2011: 3). And in January 2011 it was difficult to find in the world a population better provided with the bread than the population of Egypt (Korotayev & Zinkina, 2011a, 2011b). If anything, the Egyptian 2011 revolution was “a revolution of the fat”. As we have shown earlier, by 2011 a substantial proportion of Egyptians continued getting food subsidies from the government while suffering serious obesity problems (Korotayev & Zinkina, 2011a, 2011b; see also Grinin, 2012a; Korotayev & Zinkina, 2015: 413).

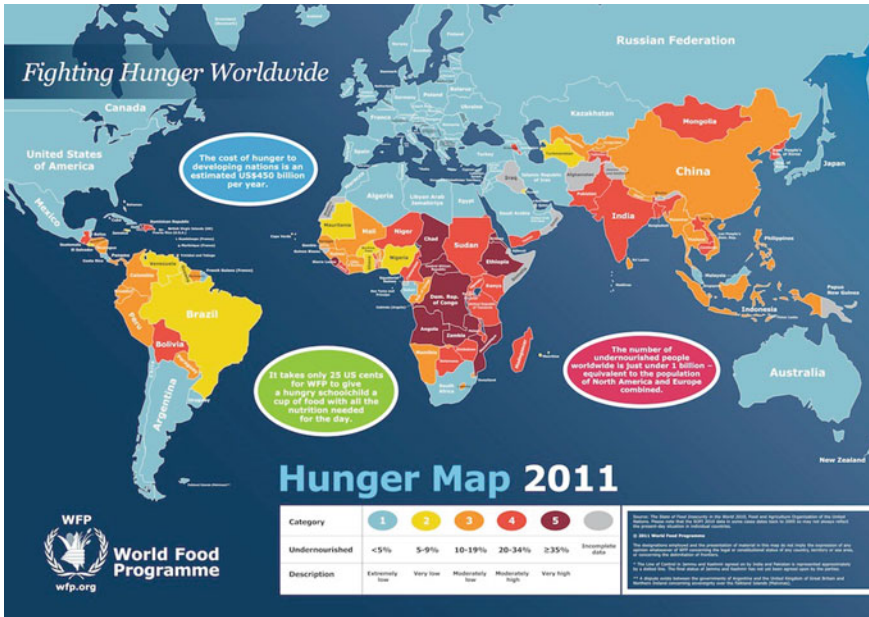


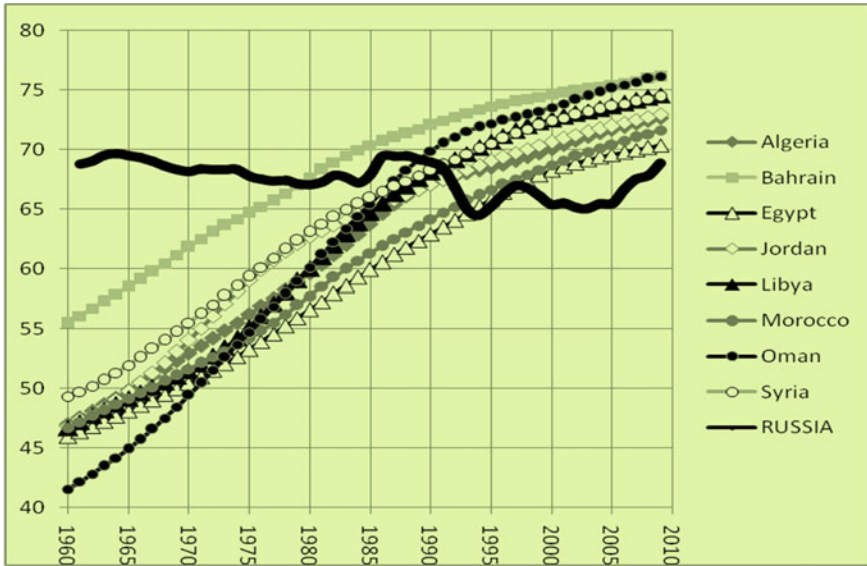
Fig. 2 “HungerMap” 2011, World Food Programme (<http://www.wfp.org/content/hunger-map-2011>)

exception of Yemen) belong to the first category together with the most developed countries of the world, indicating that the problems of hunger were irrelevant for them at the eve of the Arab Spring.

And, in general, the level of “pauperization” was not high at all. In addition, in the most important Arab country, in Egypt, the poor were very strongly supported by a very developed and sophisticated system of food subsidies (Korotayev & Zinkina, 2011a, 2011b).

Actually, in recent decades one could observe in the Arab countries rather steady trends toward an increase in the living standards of the majority of the population, which resulted, e.g., in a spectacular growth of life expectancies (see Fig. 3).

Many analysts indicate a high level of corruption as a major cause of the Arab Spring. However, according to Transparency International (2010: 2–3), the overall level of corruption in the Middle East at the verge of the Arab Spring was very similar to the one found all across the countries of the Third World (and the former Soviet Union) in general; in almost all of those countries one finds a level of corruption that is either high or very high. It is quite clear that countries with low levels of corruption are much less liable for major sociopolitical upheavals with a large death toll (Grinberg et al., 2017; Korotayev et al., 2019). For example, there were no such upheavals in those countries in the recent decade. However, in the recent decade it was also true that very many countries with high levels of corruption (China, Turkmenistan, Vietnam, Italy, Indonesia, Paraguay and so on) were also characterized by a quite

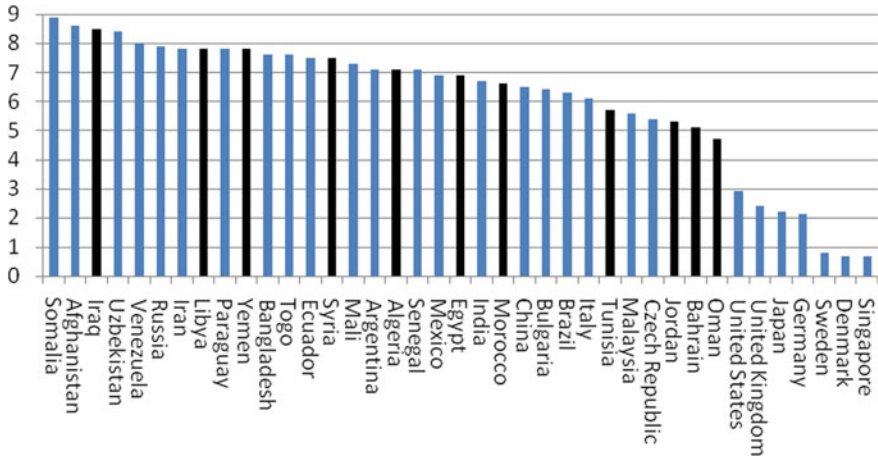


**Fig. 3** Dynamics of life expectancy at birth (years) in some Arab countries, 1960–2009 (dynamics of life expectancy in Russia is presented for a comparison) (Surinov, 2010: 101; World Bank, 2021)

high level of political stability. This already indicates that we should look for other factors in order to explain the wave of sociopolitical destabilization that engulfed the Middle East in 2011. Note also that the Middle Eastern countries differ among themselves as regards their corruption levels in a rather substantial way (see Fig. 4).

For example, such Arab countries as Jordan, Oman, or Bahrain are not classified as highly corrupt by Transparency International, whereas in most countries of this region a rather high level of corruption is observed. However, a relatively low level of corruption has not “saved” Oman, Jordan, and especially Bahrain, from serious sociopolitical upheavals. Generally speaking, serious political upheavals were observed in highly corrupted Libya and Yemen, in Tunisia and Egypt with their medium level of corruption, but also in such countries with a relatively low level of corruption as Bahrain and Oman. This suggests that a high level of corruption can hardly be regarded as the main cause of the Arab Revolutions (though, of course, a high level of corruption that is typical for most Arab countries has made a serious contribution to the genesis of the Arab Spring as well as the previous color revolutions in the 2000s).

This makes it possible to agree with those analysts who believe that the dominant role in the Arab Spring was played by political demands: freedom, democracy, and accountability of the authorities (e.g., Khalaf, 2011). This is not contradicted by the fact that the impact force of the Arab Revolutions was constituted by the highly educated unemployed (or inadequately employed) youth. Those people felt insulted by the government and saw the cause of their unsatisfactory situation in the absence of democracy and freedom, and in the defects of the authorities and regimes—the very regimes that achieved an immense expansion of university education (this is



**Fig. 4** Corruption index for some Arab and non-Arab countries of the world, 2010. *Note* The corruption index is based on the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2010: 8–14) and is obtained by extracting the basic index out of 10

especially visible with respect to Egypt—Korotayev & Zinkina, 2011a, 2011b). That is why in addition to the demand that is typical for all the revolutions—“Go away!” (*Irhal!*), they also demanded such things as free elections, the abolition of emergency rule, freedom, and democracy.

On the other hand, it appears possible to speak about a certain excessiveness of some demands directed toward the governments, which had done a lot for the development of education, for economic growth and gains in life expectancy. This excessiveness seems to have been created by inflated expectations, and by demonstration effects produced by the level of living standards in much more developed countries.

So there are some causes of the Arab Spring revolutions that are similar to the ones of some other color revolutions (Serbia-2000, Georgia-2003, Ukraine-2004, in some respects—Kyrgyzstan-2005<sup>18</sup>), namely: strong desire of democracy and freedom, tiredness from corruption, nepotism etc., a very considerable participation of youth, especially students and graduates, help from the revolutionary organizations (like Otpor)<sup>19</sup> and foreign NGOs, widespread use of Internet for mass mobilization (though for understandable reasons in the Arab revolutions the using of social networks such

<sup>18</sup> See Chapters “The ‘Color’ Revolutions. Successes and Limitations of Non-violent Protest” (Mitchell, 2022), “The Bulldozer Revolution in Serbia” (Khodunov, 2022a), “The Rose Revolution in Georgia” (Khodunov, 2022c), “The Orange Revolution in Ukraine” (Khodunov, 2022b), and “Color Revolutions in Kyrgyzstan” (Ivanov, 2022) in this book.

<sup>19</sup> See Chapter “Serbian ‘Otpor’ and the Color Revolutions’ Diffusion” (Filin et al., 2022b) in this book.

as Twitter, Facebook etc. was much wider<sup>20</sup>). However, there were special or new causes in the Arab revolutions. These are: much longer periods of the incumbent duration for the Arab autocrats in comparison with the post-Soviet ones (see above), the Islamist factor,<sup>21</sup> and a different economic situation as a whole. Unlike the wave of the 2000s, at the time of the Arab Spring the world economy was in crisis due to the world-wide Great Recession 2008–2011, which included the agflation wave (a steep rise in global food prices) caused mainly by the counter-crisis quantitative easing measures undertaken by the major economic powers [first of all the USA; see about the economic factors below; see also Chapter “[Introduction. Changing yet Persistent: Revolutions and Revolutionary Events](#)” (Goldstone et al., 2022b, in this volume)].

*Global Factors and Synchronization of Timing in the Genesis of the Arab Spring.* Globalization in general (including a fast diffusion of modern information-communication technologies as well as ideas of norms, relationships, and lifestyles that should be regarded as acceptable and desired) played an immense role in the genesis of the Arab Spring revolutionary wave (Beck, 2011; Grinin & Korotayev, 2012b, 2016a).

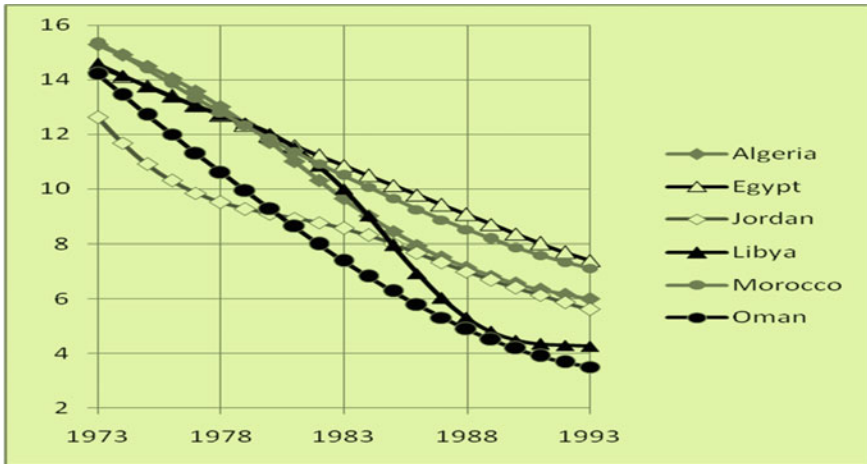
If we look further back in recent history, we will find one synchronization impulse in 1973—this was a sharp increase in world oil prices. A rain of petrodollars poured over the Arab world. Naturally, their primary receivers were the oil exporting countries, but finally every Arab country received some piece of the “oil pie”. For example, both North and South Yemen (in this period Yemen was divided into two countries) received some parts of this pie—through the channels of Arab aid, but also through massive remittances sent back to their countries by Yemeni labor migrants working in the Arab oil exporting countries. This significantly contributed to the acceleration of modernization in all the Arab countries (see Grinin, 2018d). One of the main components of modernization among the Arab countries was constituted by the development of modern health care systems. Petrodollars helped to construct networks of hospitals, maternity wards, clinics, etc. As a result, in the 1970s and 1980s we observe a precipitous decline of death rates in general (see Fig. 5), and infant and child mortality in particular, which against the backdrop of still high birth rates<sup>22</sup> led to the explosive growth of the young population (aged especially between 20 and 24) in the Arab Spring countries (Korotayev et al., 2011).

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<sup>20</sup> This point as well as the next one creates an affinity between the Arab revolutions, on the one hand, and Moldavian and Iranian events in 2009, on the other. See Chapters “[‘Moldovan Spring’ 2009: The Atypical ‘Revolution’ of April 7 and the Days that Followed](#)” (Tkachuk et al., 2022) and “[The Green Movement in Iran: 2009–2010](#)” (Filin, 2022) in this book.

<sup>21</sup> On this factor in general and its manifestation during the Arab Spring see Grinin (2019a), Grinin and Korotayev (2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020b) and Grinin et al. (2019).

<sup>22</sup> In complete accordance with the demographic transition theory the decline of the birth rates in the Arab world lagged significantly behind the decline of the death rates (see, e.g., Korotayev & Zinkina, 2011a, 2011b).

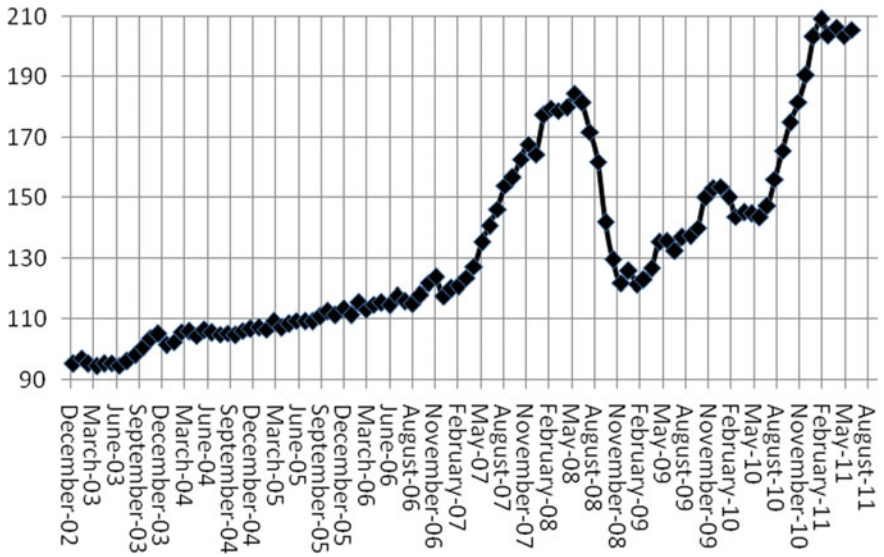


**Fig. 5** Dynamics of crude death rates (per 1000) in some Arab countries, 1973–1995 (World Bank, 2021)

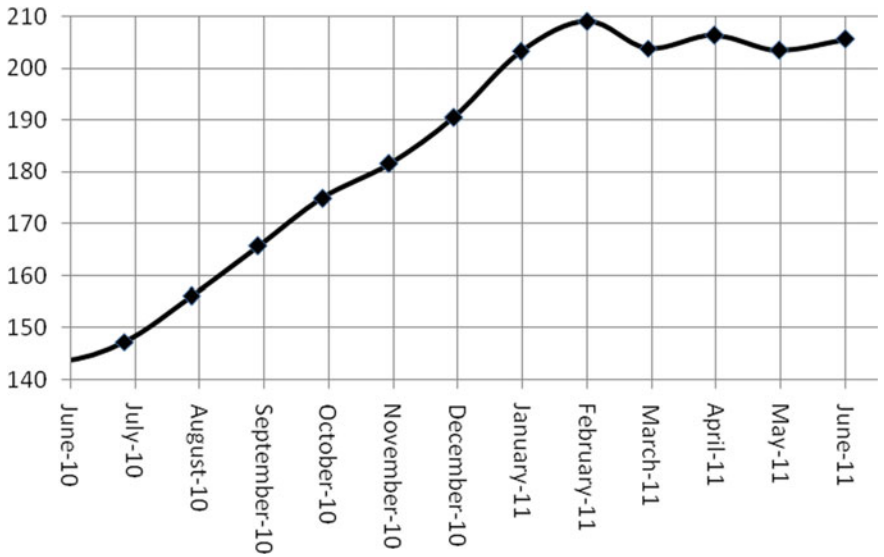
The 2008 world economic crisis should be regarded as a global factor that became a major destabilization factor in every country of the Arab Spring. It contributed significantly to the synchronization of political upheavals in different countries (including even such prosperous countries as Bahrain). A special role here was played by the “agflation” whose peak was observed in January and February 2011 (see Figs. 6 and 7):

The explosive global growth of food prices led to a corresponding growth of protest demonstrations in most countries of the world (see, e.g., Korotayev et al., 2018; Ortmans et al., 2017).

Of course, the role of this factor should not be exaggerated (finally, in most countries of the world the growth of protest induced by the agflation wave 2010–2011 did not lead to revolutions); however, in socio-politically misbalanced Arab countries this factor appears to have played a major additional role in the genesis of sociopolitical explosions (see, e.g., Akaev et al., 2012; Johnstone & Mazo, 2011; Korotayev & Zinkina, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d; Grinin, 2012a; Khodunov & Korotayev, 2012; Ferragina & Canitano, 2014; Demarest, 2015; Grinin, 2012a; Grinin et al., 2016); moreover, it acted as one of the most important impulses of the synchronization of the Arab Spring events. Note also that given the high degree of economic inequality in the Arab countries, this wave pushed a mass of lower-class Arabs (who suddenly, if briefly, found themselves below the poverty line as a result of the explosive food price growth) to join the vanguard force of the Arab revolutions—the highly educated unsettled youth. Naturally, this gave the protests the force that was necessary to topple regimes.



**Fig. 6** World food price dynamics (FAO general monthly food price index, 2002–2004 = 100, inflation adjusted), January 2003–June 2011 (FAO, 2017a)



**Fig. 7** World food price dynamics (FAO general monthly food price index, 2002–2004 = 100, inflation adjusted), July 2010–June 2011 (FAO, 2017a)

A very important role in the synchronization of those events was played by the diffusion of new information technologies (see, e.g., Akaev et al., 2017; AlSayyad & Guvenc, 2015; Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Hänska Ahy, 2016; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Khamis & Vaughn, 2014; Khondker, 2011; Schroeder et al., 2012; Steinert-Threlkeld, 2017; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013; Vasiliev, 2011). Naturally, one should take into account the point that long before the Arab Spring one could observe in the Arab world the formation of a unified Internet space (see, e.g., Abdulla, 2007) where inhabitants of those Arab countries that had not been reached yet by the Spring 2011 protest wave could communicate freely with the inhabitants of the countries already covered by the “Tsunami of Revolutions” (Vasiliev, 2011) in Standard Arabic comprehensible to all Internet-literate Arabs. Note that if even one of the authors of this chapter (living thousands of kilometers away from Cairo) got through Facebook an invitation to join protests in Cairo on the 25th of January, 2011, then it should be clear that a few millions of Internet-users (both inside and outside Cairo and Egypt) must have received such invitations.<sup>23</sup> It should also be noted that during the Arab Spring one could observe the proliferation of not only European know-how, but also of genuinely Middle Eastern inspirations, like the exploitation of the especially favorable opportunities to organize protest meetings and demonstrations on Fridays, the day of mosque assemblies (see, e.g., AlSayyad & Massoumi, 2012; Cherribi, 2017; Droz-Vincent, 2014; Hoffman & Jamal, 2014).

A very special role in the synchronization of the Arab Spring events was played by the pan-Arab satellite TV channels—first of all, *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiyya* (see, e.g., Tausch, 2011; Khondker, 2011; Sultan, 2013; Cherribi, 2017). It is important to note that in the Arab world, the 2000s observed a sort of media revolution that expressed itself, *inter alia*, in the emergence of extremely professional high-quality pan-Arab TV channels. Of course, Al-Jazeera is the best known of them, but Al-Arabiya, the Saudi-Emirate analogue of Al-Jazeera, is quite comparable as regards the level of professionalism. With respect to those TV channels one can speak unequivocally about a world level TV journalism that suddenly emerged (and of special importance, of course, is the point that by the eve of the Arab Spring they had become immensely popular in the whole Arab world—including those countries where mass media were under strict state control).

Those who in course of the Arab Spring observed broadcasts of those channels in a language comprehensible to the entire Arab world, those who saw the work of the talented TV journalists who broadcast in real time exceptionally vivid images of explosive popular protests, have no doubt that they played an immense role in the genesis of the sociopolitical tsunami of the Arab Spring. It is remarkable that the Arab Spring revolutionary wave produced a much stronger effect inside rather than outside the Arab world—even in those countries that were rather close to the countries of the Arab Spring as regards their demographic structural and political characteristics, but that did not receive continuous streams of vivid images of popular rebellion whose

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<sup>23</sup> On the role of information technologies in revolutions see Chapters “On Revolutionary Situations, Stages of Revolution, and Some Other Aspects of the Theory of Revolution” (Grinin, 2022b) and *Evolution and Typology of Revolutions*” (Grinin, 2022a) in this book; see also Akaev et al. (2017).

participants shouted out immensely attractive slogans in one's own language. We believe that a certain role was even played by the brilliant main slogan of the Arab Spring that was born during the first, Tunisian, revolution—*al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*. In addition to its excellent inflammatory (but only for those who know Arabic) rhythmic structure, it also played its role through its meaning—"the people want to bring down the regime"—thus it was directed not against some particular ruler or regime, but could be used in any Arab country without any modification, so in any Arab country it produced very strong repercussions.

And, of course, the "revolutionary tsunami" would not have swept throughout the Arab world if the Tunisian Revolution had not been so swift and relatively bloodless, thus creating a feeling that any "oppressing" Arab regime could be toppled in a similarly swift and bloodless way.

## 5 Conclusion

To summarize, regarding the spread of the Arab Spring wave:

- (1) Although protests in Algeria began earlier, the already traditional practice of describing the events of the Arab Spring as commencing on December 17, 2010, when young unemployed Mohammed Boazizi committed self-immolation in the provincial Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, seems quite justified. The rising wave of protests following this event resulted in an unexpectedly rapid fall of the Ben Ali regime, primarily because of the coming to the surface of intra-elite conflicts between the unprivileged army and the privileged security forces that were under the special care of President Ben Ali. As a result, the army moved to the side of the protesters, which predetermined the rapid fall of the authoritarian regime in Tunisia.
- (2) An unexpectedly fast (and rather bloodless) fall of the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali in Tunisia prompted the leaders of youth secular movements in Egypt to try to organize (with the wide use of social networks) large-scale protests in that country. Due to the internal stresses accumulated in Egypt [and described in detail in Chapter "[Egypt's 2011 Revolution. A Demographic Structural Analysis](#)" (Korotayev & Zinkina, 2022, in this volume)], this attempt triggered an avalanche that led to the fall of the Mubarak regime.
- (3) These events then launched a wave of destabilization throughout the Arab world (though harbingers of this wave started manifesting themselves immediately after the rapid victory of the Tunisian revolution). The scale of destabilization in specific countries depended primarily on the extent to which there were present the appropriate conditions, such as the presence of inter-elite conflict, the intermediate nature of the political system, the presence of unprivileged groups (with the exception of "guest workers"), and a high proportion of unemployed young people (especially those with higher education). In some cases

(especially in Libya and Syria) an important role was played by external destabilizing actors. On the other hand, a strong stabilizing influence in the countries of the Arab Spring was the presence of bloody political turmoil in the recent past; in those countries both the elites and the commoners well remembered that as a result of a powerful destabilization everybody would suffer, and so obviously tried to avoid another such destabilization [see Chapter “[The Arab Spring. A Quantitative Analysis](#)” (Korotayev et al., 2022, in this volume) for more detail on such factors; see also Grinin et al., 2016, 2019; Korotayev et al., 2013, 2014; Malkov et al., 2013; Tsirel, 2012b].

Synchronization of the destabilization processes in the Arab Spring was facilitated by the following factors<sup>24</sup>:

- (1) the presence of pan-Arab Internet networks, through which Arab revolutionary youth could freely exchange calls for insurrections, share concrete experiences of protest activities, etc.;
- (2) the presence of pan-Arab TV channels that broadcast vivid images of revolutionary protests throughout the Arab World;
- (3) the wave of global agflation whose peak fell just on February 2011;
- (4) and, finally, sharing a similar phase of the modernization transition, in which most Arab countries were located, with its characteristic rapid growth in the number of highly educated (and often unsettled) youth.

Why have revolutions in the Arab countries failed to establish a stable democracy? The fact is that throughout history, revolutions frequently lead to dictatorships even more cruel than the pre-revolutionary regime, and moreover, to the societies’ degradation [see, e.g., Grinin, 2012a, 2013a, 2013b, 2017a, 2017b; Grinin & Korotayev 2016a; Grinin et al., 2016; Gurr, 1988; Huntington, 1968; see also Chapters “[Revolutions, Counterrevolutions, and Democracy](#)” (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022) and “[Why have so Many Revolutions Occurred in Recent Years, and are They Likely to Continue to Occur in the Future?](#)” (Goldstone et al., 2022a) in this book]. One can speak about the so-called Thermidor Law where a revolutionary tide is followed by a reactionary ebb, which most frequently takes the form of dictatorship [see Chapter “[On Revolutionary Situations, Stages of Revolution, and Some Other Aspects of the Theory of Revolution](#)” (Grinin, 2022b) in this book].

Certainly, revolutions can stir societies, mobilize new forces, raise urgent issues, and give considerable political experience. They can lead to positive developments. But one can hardly expect that revolutions can suddenly solve the most important political and social problems. Unfortunately, at present the developmental model most commonly follows not the desirable scheme from revolution to democracy

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<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Beck (2011), Eltantawy and Wiest (2011), Khondker (2011), Johnstone and Mazo (2011), Korotayev and Zinkina (2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d), Tausch (2011), Vasiliev (2011), Grinin (2012a), Akaev et al. (2012, 2017), Khodunov and Korotayev (2012), Schroeder et al. (2012), Howard and Hussain (2013), Sultan (2013), Wolfsfeld et al. (2013); Ferragina and Canitano (2014), AlSayyad and Guvenc (2015), Demarest (2015), Grinin et al. (2016), Grinin and Korotayev (2012b, 2016a), Hänska Ahy (2016), Steinert-Threlkeld (2017), Cherribi (2017) and Ortmans et al. (2017).

but the one from revolution to either counter-revolution (as in Egypt, which seems more preferable), or to new revolutions or bloody chaos and civil wars, as arose in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. Moreover, sometimes the chaos unleashed by revolutions leads to the creation of terrorist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS/Daesh). In any case the euphoria of revolution and its initial slogans gave way to deep splits in Arab society, a drop in living standards, and the transformation of peaceful protests into protracted conflicts, civil wars and military interventions.

The Arab Spring events thus repeat the lesson that revolution does not necessarily lead to democracy and that the transition to democracy requires a certain level of development, mentality and readiness of a significant part of population. Otherwise, revolutions can even delay the transition to democracy, as we see in many of the Arab countries.

The Arab Spring revealed the military-civilian conflicts, international forces and ethno-religious problems which turned the renovation expectations of the Spring into the gloomy reality of winter. We can say that the revolutionary wave of 2010–2011 has only exacerbated the Arab countries' problems. Tunisia is the only Arab country to have emerged from the Arab Spring with some progress toward democracy intact, but even there progress was threatened by terrorism and economic hardships. With regard to the possibilities of searching for new forms of organizing society, and showing the weakness and faults of the long-standing personalist semi-authoritarian regimes, these revolutions were of great importance for the region. However, the price of such experience was too high.

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# The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and the Birth of the Arab Spring Uprisings



Vasily Kuznetsov

## 1 The Ben Ali Regime

The political regime in Tunisia over the twenty-three year presidency of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali can be briefly described as authoritarian, bureaucratic and not driven by ideology. In practice, Ben Ali's authoritarian bureaucratic regime, by prohibiting any political opposition, left him vulnerable to the very success of his socioeconomic strategy. The "Tunisian miracle"<sup>1</sup> created both widespread aspirations for a dignified life and a strong civil society that was not content to remain voiceless in the face of Ben Ali's increasingly corrupt regime.

The key elements of the regime that were responsible for the depoliticizing of society were the state bureaucratic apparatus, the ruling party structure, trade unions and the police. These organizations sought to smother Tunisian society to extinguish any opposition to Ben Ali.

By the winter of 2010, the membership of the ruling party—the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD)—included 2.5 million people, i.e. around a third of the country's entire adult population, making it effectively the central political organization of the nation. Meanwhile, the largest of the permitted registered opposition parties had no more than several hundred members (the Green Party for Progress not more than 500 members, the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) no more than 1500 members). The mere fact that just a small fraction of society was even aware of the existence of the opposition parties testifies to the control of the ruling party over Tunisia's political life.

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<sup>1</sup> Expression coined by French President Jacques Chirac (Beau & Tuquoi 2011: 14).

The part that the RCD played in Tunisia was typical for one-party bureaucratic regimes: the party mobilized the masses to support the regime, served as a channel for the development and renewal of the political elite, and provided connectivity between the government and society, although only in a unilateral fashion—“the chief mission of the party is to disseminate the imperatives of the dictator among the general public, to communicate the government propaganda” (Duverger, 2005: 313).

Not least, the RCD was entrusted with the key function of legitimizing the existing regime. After all, it was not only the main political party in Tunisia, but the legal successor of the party that had led the country in its struggle for independence and executed national governance for a period of fifty years. The RCD itself thus exemplified Tunisia’s statehood, a symbolism reinforced in the RCD’s physical presence. The RCD was headquartered within the highest building in the capital city of Tunis, a structure that had a certain domineering character as an architectural site, and also housed the party subsidiaries from the provincial townships and featured red national flags on the façade, portraits of the President and banners carrying current political slogans, all obviously designed to clearly indicate where the country’s power brokers were seated.<sup>2</sup>

It was this legitimizing function of the government party that required it to have a massive footprint.<sup>3</sup> And it was because of this function that, as the revolutionary movement was gaining momentum, the slogan “Ben Ali dégage!” was replaced by “RCD dégage!”,<sup>4</sup> and disbandment of the RCD became the symbol of the victorious revolution and the hallmark of the eventual dismantling of the old order.

The role of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) was somewhat more complicated. On the one hand, its political mission was close to the one assigned to the RCD inasmuch as the deep-rooted traditions of the trade union movement (the UGTT was founded in 1946) were woven into the fabric of the national identity. The regime thus sought to use the UGTT to keep workers loyal to the regime. On the other hand, the UGTT had always held a more independent stance than the national party, and periodically had been a powerful voice for workers protesting for better conditions and wages. Under Ben Ali, the top management and regional leaders of the organization had long been part and parcel of the ruling system,<sup>5</sup> however, at the level of local union divisions, democratic traditions and the principle of rotation of

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<sup>2</sup> Other power centers that were conspicuous against the backdrop of the city’s topography were the police, municipality, and cathedral mosque buildings (Camau & Geisser, 2003: 160–161).

<sup>3</sup> It was precisely the support by the party that made Ben Ali a Presidential candidate time and again. It is noteworthy that preparatory efforts to put forward his candidacy for the elections in 2014 (on the sixth mandate) got underway in the summer of 2010 with a statement released by the RCD Central Committee calling for him to continue to rule the country over the next period”, it was then backed by collective letters (Jeune Afrique, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> “Ben Ali—Out You Go”, “RCD—Out You Go!”.

<sup>5</sup> Thus, for instance, the UGTT Secretary in Sfax retained his post consecutively for 30 years, the Secretary in Gafsa not only held his post for a long time, but also served as a Parliament deputy for six consecutive terms, together with his relatives he formed a holding structure that incorporated a firm to hire manpower and a private security company.

office had been retained. Naturally, this ultimately led to the growing tensions inside the organization which culminated in the rank and file of the local divisions defying the national leadership to play a mobilizing role in the 2011 revolution (Netterstrøm, 2016).

Finally, the third pillar propping up the regime was the police. Over a long time, the state headed by Ben Ali was categorized by his opponents as “the police-ridden state,” with a huge plain-clothes police force and thousands of informers supplementing the uniformed police, although no official reports dealing with the structure of law enforcement bodies were ever published. Michel Camau and Vincent Geisser in a classical work entitled “Le syndrome autoritaire. Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali,” with reference to the National Council for Liberties in Tunisia (CNLT) wrote that the overall number of all police forces in the country (including the National Guard and Public Order Brigade), as of 2000, was 133,000 persons, i.e. 1 policeman per 70 local residents (for comparison, in 2008 France had less than 1 police officer per 500 inhabitants) (Camau & Geisser, 2003: 204).<sup>6</sup> This figure, either being reduced or increased, was later cited in one publication after another. Only after the revolution, the new Minister of Interior Affairs Farhat Rajhi made a statement that in reality the number of the police forces did not exceed 55,000 people, and shortly before, a similar assumption was made by a well-known economist, opponent and human rights activist Mahmoud Ben Romdhane (Ben Romdhane, 2011: 108). This was still an exceptionally large police force relative to the population, and despite this actual disclosure, the myth of a huge and powerful repression mechanism was credibly circulating up until the time of the revolution.

It should be mentioned in this connection that relying primarily on the police to maintain order and support the regime, while paying little regard to the military power of the Army, was a characteristic feature of the Tunisian political system that distinguished it from other Arab countries. The relative marginalization of the Army was the result of a consistent policy pursued by the first Tunisian President, Habib Bourguiba. In contrast to many other Arab leaders of the struggle for independence epoch, Bourguiba had no history in the military, and apparently was apprehensive of the possibility that the military might seize power and monopolize the government. In consequence, the numerical strength of the Tunisian military forces was not very impressive (not more than 35,000 of assigned personnel), and the military were de facto banned from any involvement in political affairs. The military were not represented in the Council of Ministers, and moreover, soldiers and officers were subjected to discrimination regarding their voting rights.

By 2011, a huge bureaucratic and repressive machinery made up of the RCD, the UGTT, and the Ministry of Interior Affairs (which commanded the police) was involved in controlling the body politic for the regime. The actual leadership, who made political decisions and who were protected by this machinery, comprised about 150 persons who exercised monopolistic control over all of the large business sectors

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<sup>6</sup> To compare: in France, in 2002, this proportion was 1/265, in Germany—1/296, in Great Britain—1/380, in Russia—1/129 (Edict of the RF President on the Maximum Number of the Internal Affairs Bodies in the Russian Federation: <http://graph.document.kremlin.ru/page.aspx?1;1547225>).

and who were dominated by the Presidential clan and the President's wife, Leila Trabelsi.

Certainly, over the long period of Ben Ali's rule, an opposition movement was formed in Tunisia, but it was weak and fragmented. It included the Mainstream, Non-system and Anti-system opposition factions. The Mainstream faction was represented both by totally loyal Parliamentary parties, such as the Green Party for Progress, a more free-standing Tajdid movement (formerly the Tunisian Communist Party), the non-Parliamentary PDP, and the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (later renamed Ettakatol). The Non-system opposition was made up of the poorly institutionalized student movement (primarily of left-wing orientation), and multiple human rights activists and parties-in exile, who mostly operated from overseas (including the Congress for the Republic and the Islamic Ennahda party). Lastly, the radical Islamists (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) and the extreme left-wing Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (PCOT), whose task was to get ready for the proletarian revolution, constituted the Anti-system opposition.

The activities carried out by the opposition evoked an array of responses from the regime. It was eager to put up with the Mainstream opposition and exerted efforts to open the door to Parliament with the golden key—pursuant to the Law on the Partial Budget Financing of Political Parties, their subsidies could be given quite openly. The student movement was also immune from severe persecution, as long as it was confined to the framework of its university campuses, and did not attempt to voice their criticism personally against the President and his relatives. As for the Islamists of all stripes, from moderate to radical, the fight against them was waged in a most resolute and explicit manner, which made them the only victim of the regime known to all.<sup>7</sup> It was a more difficult task to deal with the human rights activists. While the government formally hailed its support for human rights, it had set up its own structures and appointed functionaries to those positions designated to ensure the observance of human rights (the High Committee for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, a group of citizen controllers, national ombudsman etc.); at the same time, it curtailed the activities of independent organizations and private individuals who were outspoken in condemning the regime, sometimes charging them with criminal offences.<sup>8</sup>

## 2 Conditions Start to Change

For a long time, opposition sentiments were shared only by an insignificant part of the local community. Under Bourguiba, whose legacy Ben Ali sought to claim, Tunisia

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<sup>7</sup> According to the statements made by Ennahda representatives, throughout the years of Ben Ali's rule, 30,000 members of this movement were sent to jail.

<sup>8</sup> A vivid example can be furnished by the case of Communist journalist Fahem Boukadous (Nessma TV Channel) and also of journalist Taoufik Ben Brik, author of the book "Une si douce dictature. Chroniques tunisiennes".

was widely praised as the most progressive of the Arab regimes. Within Tunisia, those who were aware of the activities of regime opponents constituted just a small group of people—total censorship over the mass media and the Internet was imposed to keep the opposition silent.

This began to change in 2008: “From 2008, we have witnessed that the situation has been changing in various fields. It concerns the appearance of theatrical performances expressing the sense of public discontent, the growing rate of violence at the football matches, where the spectators would often square off against the police, and rap music that conveyed the political message even more strikingly than any speeches made by politicians, and of course, recurrent acts of protest and mobilizations in the south of the country. All of this started after the Redeyef events...”, said the PDP Secretary General Maya Jribi in a conversation with the author.<sup>9</sup>

The revolt of the Gafsa phosphate Mining Basin workers in Redeyef and other nearby towns, which lasted from January through June 2008, was the first massive manifestation of protest that led to loss of lives,<sup>10</sup> and the first major protest since Ben Ali took power in 1987. The revolts eventually included thousands of workers protesting against unemployment and poverty, and was suppressed by security forces using water cannon and live ammunition. However, it never received any broad public support,<sup>11</sup> nor was it ever widely commented upon locally.<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact that the movement itself was very limited, that it occurred at a geographically remote location, and its demands were of a truly parochial nature, it still succeeded in revealing the weaknesses of the ruling regime: not only corruption and rising unemployment, but the harsh repressive response of the regime also showed a complete lack of the aptitude to engage in a dialogue with the residents.

After the Redeyef events, over a period of two years, there was a growing sense of social discontent in evidence, although it was initially devoid of any clear political connotations. It is worthwhile mentioning the rising wave of activity among the football fans,<sup>13</sup> protests in Ben Gardane in the summer of 2010, and the general atmosphere of frustration over the hateful government: “Much has changed over the recent two–three years,” said Quannes Hafiane, Director of the Higher Institute of Foreign Languages, University of Carthage, Tunisia. “People have started to tell

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<sup>9</sup> From the records of personal conversations, June 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Four persons died in the course of protests (Amroussia, 2009). For more information on the regional situation, see Al-tashghil (2010). This research was published in the summer of 2010 and was conducted by the UGTT science center. Concurrently, a similar research study dealing with the Sidi Bouzid area was released (the very area where on December 17, 2010, the revolution would begin).

<sup>11</sup> The strike, largely organized by the local UGTT section, was supported neither by the regional, nor by the central trade union management. Among the political parties, only the PDP, Ettajdid and the Tunisian Workers’ Communist Party came out on the side of the protestors.

<sup>12</sup> Even in the summer of 2011, most Tunisians knew nothing about the Redeyef events. However, the movement evoked a broad response abroad (in Paris, manifestations took place in support of the rioters) (Amroussia, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> The statistical data reflecting the formation of football fan clubs is offered by the very fans themselves: 1995-1, 2001-1, 2002-2, 2003-4, 2004-1, 2005-1, 2006-1, 2007-10, 2008-6, 2009-6, 2010-8.

jokes about the government, even over the phone, to come up with criticism of Ben Ali and Leila; we all have been waiting for something...”.<sup>14</sup>

### 3 From Protest to Revolution

This “something” happened on 17 December 2010, when a young man named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of the local administration building in the town of Sidi Bouzid—the capital of the governorate of Sidi Bouzid—located in central Tunisia. Bouazizi’s act of self-immolation was not the first nor an absolutely unique manifestation of protest and despair in modern Tunisia. Back in 1990, the doctors working at the Trauma and Burn Center, Hospital Aziza Othmana, wrote about an “epidemic of self-immolation” in the country (Messadi et al., 1998), and there have been several similar incidents in 2010,<sup>15</sup> while each time the case followed the same pattern—a young man or woman at the bottom of the social scale (unemployed or day laborers) attempted to commit suicide after being subjected to social humiliation (Messadi et al., 1998).<sup>16</sup>

However, the video showing Bouazizi embroiled in flames went viral in the internet, and already on the next day many young people took to the streets of the town to protest. The harsh police response to these protests was captured on cell phones videos that also spread, triggering further protests. Thus this event sparked a revolution.

There are a number of theories explaining why Bouazizi’s suicidal act triggered such broad public repercussions, ranging from sociological to psychoanalytic (Benslama, 2011). In the southern areas of the country, where tribal traditions (*‘arushiya*) were still prevalent, a very popular argument was that the people who had taken to the streets were driven by a sense of tribal solidarity (*‘asabiya*) with the descendants of *aulad Bou ‘Aziz*. However, there were no strong tribal structures in existence within the area of Sidi Bouzid governorate, nor in the center or north of Tunisia, by the early twenty-first century. A more realistic explanation seems to be that the first people to join the protest movement were the young people degraded to

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<sup>14</sup> From the records of my personal conversations, June 2011. About the general causes of the Arab Spring which were entirely relevant for Tunisia see Chapters “[Introduction. Changing yet Persistent: Revolutions and Revolutionary Events](#)” (Goldstone et al., 2022) and “[The Arab Spring: Causes, Conditions, and Driving Forces](#)” (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022b, in this volume).

<sup>15</sup> Two more cases became publicly known—in March 2010 in Monastir, and in November 2010 in Metlaoui.

<sup>16</sup> Besides, back in 2005, I was told about it by my Tunisian associates. It is worth reminding that M. Bouazizi, a fruit seller, who failed to enter the University and was not recruited into the Army because of his heart problems—tried to commit a suicide following a conflict with a woman police officer, who confiscated his goods and allegedly hit him on the face. However, there are at least a dozen of versions of this story.

lumpens, who ultimately were moved to greater anger by the cruel measures undertaken by the local police at the protests on the days immediately following Bouaziz's actions, on December 19th and 24th (TAP, 2011j).

Insult was further added to injury by the words of gratitude to the President from local authorities for the "steps to ensure regional development" (TAP, 2011d) (December 23rd) in combination with obscure and confusing pledges to embrace change and modernization (TAP, 2011g). Simultaneously, information about the protests in Sidi Bouzid and their cause was spread through the social media, and shortly afterwards it was transmitted via satellite TV channels, while public officials were incessantly involved in denouncing the "political orchestration" of protests by the young people (20/12, 27/12, 28/12) (TAP, 2011b, 2011e, 2011h).

A fresh impetus to push ahead with renewed energy along the path of protest mobilization was given by new acts of self-annihilation: on December 24 in Sidi Bouzid, 24-year-old Hussein Nagi Felhi climbed to the top of a high-voltage electricity pylon and electrocuted himself on the cables shouting his last words: "No for misery, no for unemployment". On December 28, 34-year old Lotfi Guadri killed herself as well (Tunivisions, 2010). Overall, across the Arab world, there were about forty people who tried to burn themselves to death following Mohamed Bouazizi's fate.

The revolutionary protests that led to Ben Ali's ouster lasted for a little less than a month—from 19 December 2010 until 14 January 2011. This period can be quite clearly subdivided into two phases—the December and January ones. The protests that took place in December did not seek to bring down the regime, and the protesters were predominantly made up of the unemployed, who articulated socio-economic demands (Kashina, 2011), as well as calling for the acceptance of "national dignity". The main outcome of the December phase was a wide proliferation of the protest movement, comprising all the regions of the country and winning support from the various strata of society. Apart from that, the tactics that were tested during December included the mobilization of protesters through social media, night-time protests, and ways to survive clashes with the police.

The hard core of protests began to change in the early days of January: political demands were heard more and more frequently, and there were more casualties involved. From January 3rd, protests in the towns of Said, Thala, Jendouba, Kasserine, Regueb, and Menzel Bouzaiane were held: the protesters set fire to government buildings and went on a rampage at the police stations. On January 8th, the police started using lethal force against the rioters. This brought major casualties from January 8th to 10th: 21 persons were killed according to official sources, and over 50 according to data released by the trade unions. After that, Thala was the venue of a "protest of old women"—the elderly women participating in this protest were carrying picket signs that ran: "You have killed my sons. There were four of them".<sup>17</sup> In all probability, these developments were perceived in an anxious society as the beginning of a revolution. A growing sense of the urgent need to finally overthrow the regime and to make use of the available possibility overwhelmed the people.

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<sup>17</sup> From the accounts of witnesses.

There was a post on Youtube that said “In Thala, tentatively on the 10th, people were engaged in the seizure of a certain government building—most likely the local RCD branch. They stripped a huge portrait of Ben Ali from the façade, and for a few minutes did not know what to do with it. They were looking at each other. At their hands. At the portrait. They were hesitant and scared—you can read it in their faces. At last, they made up their mind and set fire to it. When I saw it, I realized—this is a revolution,” told Maya Jribi.<sup>18</sup>

Simultaneously, under pressure from their local subsidiaries, the UGTT came out to back the protesters—the general strike announced by UGTT was the final chord of the revolution. The explicitly revolutionary protests started on January 10, but did not occur concurrently throughout the entire country; each day it was echoed in a new location, spreading like waves from the central region to the coast and the capital. The crucial moment was January 12th, when the general strike was due to be held in Sfax, the second largest city in Tunisia. The trade unions managed to bring about 13,000 persons out onto the central city avenue, where they were joined by more and more people—the overall number reached 30,000, according to some estimates. The protesters were led by the chairman of the local UGTT office, representatives of the opposition parties and big business. Several persons died in clashes with the police.<sup>19</sup>

The official news agency TAP never breathed a single word about the march, but instead covered a protest in support of the President in Sousse.

On January 14th, the time was ripe for the capital city. At 9:00 a.m. a delegation of lawyers, who had been on strike since January 6th, gathered in front of the Palace of Justice—around 400 persons. Dressed in long robes, accompanied by ordinary citizens, they proceeded along Bab Souika and Mongi Slim streets to the Bab Bhar square and then along Habib Bourguiba avenue to the Ministry of Interior Affairs edifice—the architectural symbol of cruelty and tyranny—a leisurely stroll along this route would normally take about half an hour: “When we were approaching the cathedral church opposite the French Embassy, I received a call from the chief police officer—with whom we were acquainted in connection with court proceedings—he was panic-stricken: “I beg you, sidi Ahmed, guide your people to walk along the left sidewalk, don’t go on the side of the embassy! Otherwise, I will have to resort to force!” I complied with his request”, lawyer Ahmed Siddique told me.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Interior Affairs began to be surrounded by other protesters, and soon the entire avenue, Mohammed 5th Square and all adjacent streets were filled with people. Some were carrying blow dryers,<sup>20</sup> many people were carrying national flags and chanting the state anthem. “*Wizarat al-dakhiliya—wizarah irhabiyah!*”—Ministry of Interior Affairs is the Ministry of Terrorism!” they chanted, “We have come unarmed—don’t kill us!” (Gozlan, 2011: 43), –they

<sup>18</sup> From the records of my personal conversations. June 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Blow dryer is a thinly veiled swipe at Leila Trabelsi, who was considered a former hairdresser. Although this fact from the biography of Carthage’s hostess is widely known, Nicholas Beau believes it is a misjudgment (Beau & Graciet, 2009).

pleaded. There were many slogans heard on that day: “*Bi-l-hubz bi-l-maa Ban Ali la!*”, “*Al-karama al-vataniya!*”,<sup>21</sup> “Ben Ali Dégage!” were perhaps the most popular. Although in the first ranks of the protestors were the most well-known opposition figures—Maya Jribi, Communist lawyer Radia Nasravi, whose husband Hamma Hammami, the leader of the Tunisian Workers’ Communist Party, was detained once again two days before, and others—not a single party or religious appeal was launched. It was the triumph of the revolution, the moment of absolute solidarity of many hundreds of thousands of people.

“I got a call from the Minister of Interior Affairs. He said: “Mrs. Jribi, I have the order to fire at the crowd of people. Take the people away.” How could I take them away? I was lifted on the shoulders of some guys, and I repeated the words of the Minister. As a matter of fact, no one left,” recalled the PDP Secretary General.<sup>22</sup>

At 3:00 p.m. the police began to disperse the protestors with tear-gas grenades. Some—in an attempt to demonstrate pacifism—came forward armed only with loaves of bread to face the policemen,<sup>23</sup> While others threw stones. It was all over in an hour, and there was not a single person on the avenue. Ben Ali dissolved his government and a state of emergency was declared in the country (TAP, 2011c).

It is not certain what might have been the outcome of these events, if the Carthage Palace in Tunis had not been the place where a most crucial conversation for the revolution took place. All the details of such conversation are not fully known to us until now, however, it is most likely that General Rashid Ammar, Chief of Staff of the Army corps, in response to the order to neutralize the protestors by military force, said to the president: “Leave this country! You are water under the bridge”.

At 16:40, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the second President of the First Tunisian Republic, who had ruled the nation for twenty-three years, two months and one week, fled the country.

## 4 Why the Arab Spring Began in Tunisia

On a final note, it is worthwhile to make two comments regarding the revolutionary developments described above.

First, about the reasons behind it. It is reasonable to assert that there are two approaches to explaining these events. The first—socio-economic one—puts the primary emphasis upon the high level of unemployment among the young people, especially among the qualified personnel with solid educational backgrounds, and also upon the elimination under Ben Ali of the critical social opportunity ladder, which was represented in Tunisia by the higher educational system: “Ben Ali, being scared of the unemployed youth, opened more and more universities, but then turned

<sup>21</sup> “Let it be bread and water, but only without Ben Ali!”, “National Dignity!”.

<sup>22</sup> From my personal conversations, June 2011.

<sup>23</sup> A loaf of bread symbolizes that a shortage of democracy cannot be substituted for by cheap food.

them into parking lots”, Mahmoud Ben Romdhane told me.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, the standard of higher education grew sharply lower, while the problem of unemployment got even worse. According to the other version, the main reason for anger with the regime was the political situation in the country: the society had grown tired of the irremovable body politic run by the Ben Ali clan for their benefit, and was eager to see the popular rights and liberties that were constantly mentioned by the President implemented, as those rights were guaranteed by the Constitution and, last but not least, could be vividly seen as exemplified by the West.<sup>25</sup>

The above two explanations both accurately target factors that contributed to the revolution, and can be further complemented by a third one: the crisis of the system of values. Ben Ali’s regime, while tossing out various ideological themes as it handled separate political issues, was almost completely lacking any overall ideological charge. The discrepancy between the liberal-democratic discourse of the President and the political reality, the authorities making appeals to either Mediterranean or Arab-Muslim identity (Abbassi, 2005) and at the same time resorting to the persecution of the zealous religious believers—all against the background of the thoroughly, if artificially, cultivated national Tunisian patriotism<sup>26</sup>—brought about the erosion of any meaningful existence underlying the current social order, which was replaced by the values inherent to consumer society and a permanent sense of shame. Therefore, it gave rise to suicides, arising out of the feeling of being humiliated and harassed, and the demands for “national dignity,” as well as the growing conviction that society needed “justice,” whatever was meant by it.

The second comment deals with the reaction of the authorities to the mass protests. There was definitely a complete lack of understanding among the authorities of what was going on, while the response to those protests revealed the regime’s stubbornly demeaning attitude toward the Tunisian people. In the official statements made in December and early January, the stringent rebuttals and threats addressed to the “vandals” and “extremists” (TAP, 2011a) were interspersed with appeals not to follow a string of foreign media outlets and parties financed from abroad (TAP, 2011f), announcements about minor government reshuffles,<sup>27</sup> and vague assurances of future socio-economic reforms in the regions. In January, Ben Ali addressed the nation three times. On January 10th he condemned the “terrorist acts” and declared that he would create 300,000 jobs by 2012. Obviously, his treatment of the protestors as terrorists,

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<sup>24</sup> From my personal conversations. June 2011. Cp. with the same situation in Egypt—see Chapters “The Arab Spring: Causes, Conditions, and Driving Forces” (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022b) and “Egypt’s 2011 Revolution. A Demographic Structural Analysis” (Korotayev and Zinkina, 2022, in this volume).

<sup>25</sup> A typical illustration. A young man, an unemployed graduate of the University of Carthage (generally, a man indifferent to politics) in answer to the question “Why did you get out onto the streets?” said: “We want justice”. “What do you mean?” I asked. “You see, we cannot live here like that, where every policeman can take your passport away from you, and you cannot utter a word”.

<sup>26</sup> A notable slogan on the synagogue building in Djerba ran: “Neither Arabs, nor Jews, but Tunisians!”.

<sup>27</sup> On 29/12 Minister of Communications was dismissed, 30/12—Governor of Sidi Bouzid, 12/01—Minister of Interior Affairs.

and his unrealizable economic pledges issued in response to the political demands, left many Tunisians in utter frustration and bewilderment, whereas the Parliament, parties and public organizations loyal to the regime hailed the “balanced approach” with enthusiasm. On January 13th, the President promised not to be a candidate for put the 2014 elections, and to provide full access to the media and worldwide web for the local residents, i.e. *de facto* act in compliance with the Constitution. He also gave orders to cease firing at the protestors and reduced prices on certain foodstuffs. The youth responded through Facebook with a post: “The sugar price has dropped. Awesome! We are going to perform a depilation all through the night!”<sup>28</sup> At last, on January 14th during the day, i.e. exactly a few hours before he fled the country, Ben Ali made a statement about the dissolution of the government and the date scheduled for the next Parliamentary election. All three of his addresses contained pie-in-the-sky socio-economic assurances that carried a heavy weight of populism, while the political concessions did not match the scale of popular disturbances underway in the country.

Most importantly, the regime was doomed to failure because by January 14th the bulk of the population in both the cities and the countryside no longer believed that Ben Ali had any interest in listening to them or improving their lives. Meanwhile, no force in Tunisia any longer existed that would be willing to go the whole way to keep the regime in place. The protests in support of the President in Sousse, Sbeitla and Tunis (a protest march by taxi drivers) (TAP, 2011i; Gozlan, 2011: 42) had a rent-a-mob character, while the Army was engaged in breaking up fights between the protestors and police (Gozlan, 2011: 40). As the protests grew larger, even the police periodically refused to open fire against the protestors, while the government’s functionaries were not prepared to take the responsibility for the bloodshed. As a result, as of January 14th, the President, who was poorly conscious of what was going on, and his entourage appeared to be totally alone. As in so many revolutions, once the bureaucracy, police, and army were no longer willing to kill or be killed to defend the ruler, he had no choice but to flee.

## 5 Transitional Governments

The immediate fate of the Revolution was, of course, not decided on January 14 itself, but rather in the days that followed. The Tunis Light Metro halted all services on January 15. Suddenly, there were no police officers on the streets and the city was filled with looters brandishing knives and sticks. Strange people with masks covering their faces were driving around in 4 × 4 jeeps, shotguns in hand. Snipers would appear in one area of the city, then in another, shooting at random passers-by: “I was at home with my family. I went out onto the balcony for something when I noticed a strange reflection on the building opposite (I only realized later that it was

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<sup>28</sup> They were not only making mockery of the government cheese, but alluding to the fact that the shaven did not need a barber (Leila Ben Ali).

a rifle sight) and then, almost at the same time, a shot rang out. The bullet hit the wall. I threw myself onto the floor and crawled into the room"; "A friend of mine was holding his child in his arms when he was shot by a sniper. The kid's head was ripped in two," eyewitnesses recalled.<sup>29</sup>

Regular citizens started to set up vigilante units in response to the bacchanal of violence in their neighbourhoods. These groups actually replaced the official police for a while and played a key role in normalizing the situation.

The situation that developed in Tunisia following January 14 was somewhat unique in that the Revolution had neither a leader nor a clearly defined ideology. What is more, there was no single political force in the country that could fill the power vacuum that had been created. In theory, the army could have taken on that role (similar to what had happened in Egypt), or even the police. But the Tunisian Army was first, apolitical, and second, weak—while the police was seen as the main ally of the fallen regime. In these conditions, the main goal of the political elite was to minimize the damage caused by the overthrow of the government.

That same evening, Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi declared himself President of Tunisia, citing Article 56 of the Constitution (on the replacement of the president in the event that he or she cannot perform their duties).<sup>30</sup> Less than a day later, however, Ghannouchi would relinquish power under heavy pressure from the Tunisian people. Parliamentary speaker Fouad Mebazaa was installed as the new president under Article 57 of the Constitution (on the replacement of the president in the event of his or her sudden resignation or death). This was exactly how Ben Ali had come to power years before, although he introduced amendments to the article to avoid a similar situation from happening in the future: under the amended Article 57, the interim president is obliged to hold elections within 60 days of his or her appointment, and is forbidden from taking part in them. However, as subsequent events demonstrated, neither Mebazaa nor Ghannouchi, who would last only 40 more days as prime minister after handing over presidency, had serious ambitions.<sup>31</sup>

The very next day, the president announced a general election, guaranteed the freedom of peaceful assembly and dissemination of information, and said that political parties and NGOs could be registered in the country without any encumbrances. Three commissions were also set up: one to investigate corruption, another to investigate crimes committed during the revolution, and a third to draft political reforms.<sup>32</sup> A national unity government was formed three days later, and it comprised many of the same faces that had occupied cabinet positions during the Ben Ali era. Opposition members included Secretary-General of the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (later renamed Ettakatol) Mustapha Ben Jafar (Minister of Health), First

<sup>29</sup> From the records of my personal conversations. June 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Déclaration de M. Mohamed Ghannouchi à la chaîne "Hannibal TV," 14.01.2011. According to Ali Seriaty, the decision was taken jointly by the prime minister and the speakers of the two houses (Gnet, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Back in 2006, U.S. diplomats wrote that Mohamed Ghannouchi, who had been serving as Prime Minister of Tunisia since 1999, was a "career technocrat" who had long wanted to step away from politics, but the opportunity had not ever presented itself.

<sup>32</sup> From my personal conversations. March 2011.

Secretary of the Ettajdid Movement Ahmed Brahim (Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research), and President of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) Ahmed Najib Chebbi (Minister of Regional Development)—that is, the leaders of the largest parties that were allowed at the time. A number of positions were also given to representatives of trade unions and human rights organizations, and one to the popular blogger Slim Amamou (he was not given a ministerial position, but was rather made a secretary of state).

The government did not last long. Representatives of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) and the Forum for Labour and Liberties were the first to abandon ship (on January 18), which eventually sank on January 27. Neither the very public expulsion of the president, prime minister and all the ministers from the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), nor the seizure of RCD property, nor the persecution of Ben Ali and the arrests of his cronies could help save it. The second post-revolution government contained even fewer faces of the Ben Ali era. They were replaced either by technocrats or representatives of public organizations, primarily human rights groups (the Tunisian Human Rights League, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women and Amnesty International). Chebbi and Brahim kept their posts.

The work of both governments was marred by constant protests, demonstrations and strikes, none of which were larger in scale than the so-called Kasbah protests.

On the morning of January 23, “Liberation Caravans” started arriving in the capital from the country’s inner regions. Around 3000 people from Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Menzel Bouzaiane and other cities demanded that the people refuse to “let their revolution be stolen” by those who had already “stolen their wealth.” (Le Point, 2011b). They were, of course, calling for the resignation of the government and the removal of anyone who used to serve on it. The Chief of staff of the Tunisian Armed Forces, General Rachid Ammar, arrived shortly after the riots began and declared that the Army would stand guard over the revolution, and Ghannouchi promised to resign immediately after the parliamentary elections (Le Point, 2011a). But this did not help, and mass protests swept the capital in the days that followed. The first Kasbah protest fizzled out on January 27 after the announcement that a new government had been formed.

The second Kasbah protest was a sit-in. It started almost a month later, on February 20, and lasted until March 3. It too led to the resignation of the government and became a kind of apotheosis of the winter protest movement. The protesters demanded the arrest of all senior officials of the Ben Ali era, the convocation of a Constituent Assembly and the creation of a Council for the Defense of the Revolution (Overblog, 2011). The speeches during the second Kasbah protest were notably more violent in their rhetoric. The difference between the two waves of protest was that the first was a popular uprising, while the second, according to witnesses, was tainted by the presence of the three biggest political forces in the country: the UGTT, the extreme left, and the Islamists. Trade union leaders feared losing popular support. The extreme left remained faithful to the doctrine of revolutionary violence, and the Islamists, who were loathed by the political elites, believed that the only way for them to be able to get a foothold in the corridors of power would be through a radical political transformation.

On January 27, a crowd of 100,000 people gathered in central Tunis. This was the biggest demonstration since January 14. The police, who had generally been trying to stay out of things until that point, were forced to take action. Five people lost their lives.

The prime minister resigned that very same day, saying, “I will not make decisions that may lead to human casualties (Le Nouvel Observateur, 2011).

Then, 84-year-old Beji Caid Essebsi was appointed as the new prime minister. Essebsi had previously headed the National Security Service (1963–1965), the Ministry of the Interior (1965–1969), the Ministry of Defense (1969–1970) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1981–1986) under President Habib Bourguiba. The tightening of the Ben Ali regime convinced him to leave politics altogether (he resigned his post as a member of parliament in 1994). He published his memoirs shortly before the Revolution took place (Caid Essebsi, 2009). In the 1970s, Essebsi defected to the democratic opposition alongside Ahmed Mestiri, which meant he was out of the ruling party for some time. He was seen as an ideal candidate for the post of prime minister. As a politician, he commanded the respect of his colleagues, had a wealth of managerial experience and no ties with the ousted regime. Moreover, his venerable age made him seemingly incapable of usurping power.<sup>33</sup> The appointment would be Essebsi’s second coming as a politician. He would go on to become a leader of the anti-Islamist opposition in 2012–2013 and then president in 2014.

Essebsi’s main task was to ensure a democratic transition. This meant, first of all, developing all the related legal procedures and, secondly, making sure that the government ran smoothly (and that it remained politically neutral).

The new prime minister held his first press conference on March 4, where he spoke, among other things, about the need to adopt a new constitution. He also urged all the ministers in his government to refuse to take part in the upcoming elections. These points were written into law on March 23, when Fouad Mebazaa issued Decree No. 2011–14 “On the Organization of State Power for the Period of Transition.”

In theory, Mebazaa’s term in office ended on March 23—the day that presidential elections were to take place. However, the only way that fair elections could take place was to make amendments to the Constitution, to roll back the changes introduced during the Ben Ali regime (unlimited number of presidential terms, etc.). These amendments were supposed to be passed by parliament. Yet, parliament was not actually functioning at the time, as most of its members represented the now defunct RCD. That meant that parliamentary elections had to be held first. But this was out of the question, as the Constitution set an unusually high entry barrier for people to become members of parliament and complicated the process of registering political parties for elections. Moreover, most people did not even know that these parties existed. Add to that the fact that the parties themselves were entirely unprepared for elections (most of them lacked clear policies, structures and financial resources), the electoral commission had not had time to draw up voter lists, and the people

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<sup>33</sup> It is generally believed that the idea for this appointment came from the president after Essebsi gave an impressive interview on Nessma TV that aired on January 17, 2011, where he talked about the need to create conditions for transitioning to a democracy.

were calling for the continuation of the revolution and for a complete break with the past. Together, these circumstances forced the authorities to agree to convene the Constituent Assembly and adopt a new Constitution. The Second Tunisian Republic was thus born.

## 6 New Political Powers

Of course, the technical and legal obstacles to holding elections were not the main reason behind the decision taken in March to radically transform the political system in Tunisia. Rather, it was the sudden expansion of the country's political space.

This was initially manifested in the information field, which exploded in the months following the revolution. First, social networks were instrumental in the revolution.<sup>34</sup> Then, after the overthrow of Ben Ali, the previously banned opposition internet resources became more influential. And, finally, the traditional media started to focus more on the political life of the country. The general distrust of the traditional media opened the doors for internet outlets to supplant it in many ways—disseminating information and creating content of their own. Young people became increasingly politicized and as a result, were refusing to blindly accept what they were being fed, and paying great attention to the actions of the government.

These new information channels succeeded in mobilizing more and more layers of the population to political activity: fewer than half a million people took direct part in the Revolution (that is, just 5% of the population), and in February 2011, the only parties that more than 5% of the Tunisian people were aware of were the RCD, Ennahda and the PDP (TAP, 2011k). By September, 74% of people were more or less certain about where their political preferences lay—several dozen political parties were named by people responding to surveys (with 18 main ones).<sup>35</sup>

The political parties that were the most active and best developed were the moderate Islamist party, Ennahda; the Congress for the Republic; the PDP; the Forum for Labour and Liberties; the Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (PCOT); Hizb ul-Tahrir and, finally, Ettajdid (which was made up of a dozen or so moderately left-wing parties) and the Left Socialist Party. All these parties existed before the Revolution, and almost all of them had relatively developed structures and funding (the most ramified were Ennahda and the PDP, while the least were the PCOT and Hizb ul-Tahrir).

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<sup>34</sup> About the role of social networks in the Arab Spring revolutionary wave see Chapter “[The Arab Spring: Causes, Conditions, and Driving Forces](#)” (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022b), about the role of information technologies in revolutions in general see Chapter “[On Revolutionary Situations, Stages of Revolution, and Some Other Aspects of the Theory of Revolution](#)” (Grinin, 2022, in this volume).

<sup>35</sup> Although 44% admitted that they were not sure (Observatoire tunisien, 2011).

The most influential of the newly created parties were Afek Tounes (Tunisian Aspirations) and Initiative, which was built on the ruins of the RCD, although neither is nearly as well-known as any of the parties listed in the previous paragraph.<sup>36</sup>

It is rather difficult to classify Tunisia's political parties in terms of their ideological affiliation. Almost all of them talked about democracy, justice, respect for human rights, building a socially oriented state (typically of the "Scandinavian type"), Arab and Maghreb unity, etc. Several environmental and right-wing liberal parties were openly marginalized. So too were a number of Arab nationalist parties.

Perhaps the only significant point of ideological concern in the run-up to the elections was the question of the role of religion in the future state. Ettajdid and the leftist parties became a haven for Westernized intellectuals, who consistently championed Tunisia's secular nature (*laïcité*). This *laïcité*—a concept rarely used in the political vernacular of Arabic-speaking Tunisia and seen by many in the country as a synonym for atheism—was lauded to the skies by Ettajdid and its supporters and became the central concept that unified the anti-Islamist forces in the Democratic Modernist Pole in June. But the perception of the party as being full of Francophone atheists who were "terribly far from the people" meant that the Democratic Modernist Pole did not gain any kind of foothold among the people.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Modernist Pole's main opponent, Ennahda, appeared entirely ambivalent in its political maneuverings—a criticism that is often levelled at Islamist parties. Despite the fact that the party's members tried to sell it as something akin to the Justice and Development Party in Turkey (which at the time, before Erdogan's power grab, was considered a moderate, pro-democratic Islamic party) Ennahda's "doublespeak" was a constant target of ridicule. Party leaders would say one thing to the press and then something completely different when addressing their followers from the minbars of mosques. Leading Tunisian political commentator Hamadi Redissi has suggested that this dual discourse (modernist and reactionary) reflected the Ennahda party's dual strategy (peaceful vs. violent), which was carried out through a dual organization (one public and one clandestine) (Redissi et al., 2012: 3).

While it is easy enough to agree that there was a certain duality in the party's discourse, it would be far more worthwhile to look into the reasons why it appeared in the first place. It is likely that Ennahda's leaders wanted to walk the line between positioning the party as a respectable force and seeking to gain popularity among the entire Islamic electorate in the country—radicals, moderates, conservatives, and those who were simply anti-Western—while at the same time trying to deal with a generational conflict within the party itself (its younger supporters were more radical than its leaders). This dual discourse thus exposed a lack of unity within the party and was a consequence of the uncontrollability of its social base. As for whether or not Ennahda used underground combat units, the later appearance of the Revolutionary Defense League—vigilante youth brigades that emerged to protect the revolution and fight against "anti-Islamic" forces—may suggest that some of the party's leaders did consider resorting to violence at some point.

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<sup>36</sup> For more on these parties, see Khémira (2011).

Ennahda followed a decidedly conservative populist blueprint in its election campaign, rather than an Islamist one. Its leaders talked about human rights, democracy, the inviolability of Tunisia's achievements with regard to women's rights, the continuation of the tradition of *ijtihad*, and the need to develop relations with European partners to the fullest extent possible. The conservative slant consisted in emphasizing the importance of traditional values (the family, marriage, etc.) and Arab-Muslim identity. The party manifesto was also decidedly religious in nature and contained numerous quotes from the Quran. Moreover, its first article states that Islam is the religion of the state of Tunisia. The mention of Islam in the first article of the current Constitution, however, is traditionally interpreted as an indication of the country's historical and cultural identity.

However, Ennahda's popularity was not down to its successful election campaign. Rather, it was the result of several other factors: sizeable financial opportunities, the party's image as a victim of the fallen regime, and the ability to ingratiate itself with the electorate (using mosques, organizing aid to the poor, arranging weddings, funerals, etc.).

In replacing the now discredited institutions and personnel of the former government, and creating a transitional authority, the major parties agreed on the basic structure: a national assembly that would include representatives of trade unions, NGOs and political parties, and be charged with drawing up a new constitution and setting up new elections. However, different groups diverged in how they viewed the Revolution. The far left believed in the Revolution as a popular movement and were adamant that "its logic should be respected." Liberal human rights activists and old oppositionists were willing to declare the current authorities illegitimate, but at the same time they were particularly averse to mass actions of any kind—hence the desire to transfer power to a body consisting of tried-and-tested political figures. Finally, the leaders of the Forum for Labour and Liberties sought to "ride" the Revolution and take up the most prominent positions in power.

By early February, a compromise of sorts had been found between these three views that led to the creation of the National Council for the Defense of the Revolution (National Council) on February 11, which included 28 organizations. Despite the apparent variety of organizations on the council (with Islamists, nationalists, syndicalists and human rights activists), it was nevertheless predominantly left-leaning.

The main aim of the National Council was to achieve a complete break from with the Ben Ali past and complete the Revolution. As such, it demanded the authority to make political decisions, oversee transitional legislation, the government itself and government commissions, and appoint senior officials. But, in the end, its functions were confined to organizing elections to the Constituent Assembly, after which it would be disbanded (Tunisie numerique, 2011).

Regional councils for the defense of the Revolution were opened in addition to the National Council and independently of it, appearing spontaneously after January 14—they were often made up of the same self-defense detachments that had watched over the neighborhoods in the initial days following the Revolution.

Despite all the difficulties in actually getting the National Council up and running, it was theoretically in a position to become the main institution of power in the transitional period (Chaker, 2011). And it would have succeeded if the organizations that made it up pursued similar goals and were ready for decisive action.

However, by mid-February, the people were already growing tired of the constant unrest, the lack of security had become a major issue across the country, and the ruling elite made it clear that they were not ready to cooperate with the National Council. A decree on the creation of an independent public organization—the Higher Authority for Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transition (the Higher Authority)—was soon issued (on February 18). The new organization was to supersede the Higher Political Reform Commission headed by eminent lawyer Yadh Ben Achour. At the same time, on February 22, President Mebazaa rejected the proposal of the National Council to issue a decree recognizing the Higher Authority and transferring power to it. However, he soon invited its members to join the Higher Authority.

The Higher Authority's task, according to the decree, was "to study legislative acts relating to political organization, propose reforms, and define the goals of the Revolution as they pertained to the democratic process."<sup>37</sup> This effectively made it the supreme legislative body for the remainder of the transitional period—decisions of the Higher Authority were passed on to the president and were made legally enforceable through presidential decrees.

The only political forces that refused to compromise were, of course, on the far left. On January 14, almost everyone in the Popular Front declined an invitation to become a part of the Higher Authority. Its members mercilessly levelled accusations against the Higher Authority, claiming that it lacked legitimacy, was not representative of the people, and was legally incompetent. All three charges seem somewhat far-fetched.

The Higher Authority was made up of a committee of experts that included 15 lawyers led by Yadh Ben Achour that was responsible for drafting bills, and a council that discussed and adopted these bills. The council initially consisted of 72 people, before being expanded to 155 in April, which is how it stayed until Ennahda left the Higher Authority in June. The 155-strong council included members of 12 political parties, representatives trade unions, the biggest NGOs and individual regions, members of the families of "martyrs of the Revolution," and 72 "prominent personalities" (human rights defenders, leading scientists, etc.).

A schism soon formed within the Higher Authority, between the secular parties on the one hand and Ennahda, supported by the Congress for the Republic, on the other. These parties disagreed on the main issues discussed by the Higher Authority (the date of the elections, the adoption of a law on political parties, party financing), although the Republican Pact turned out to be the main stumbling block. Heavily pushed by Ettajdid, the Republican Pact was supposed to be a kind of framework agreement for all political forces in the country, describing the basic principles of Tunisian statehood and, most importantly, guaranteeing the separation of religion and politics. Ennahda and the Congress for the Republic declared that only the Constituent

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<sup>37</sup> Author's archive.

Assembly could adopt the document and promptly left the Higher Authority. As a result, the signing of the pact lost its meaning and the legitimacy of the Higher Authority suffered somewhat.

Summing up what we said earlier about political parties and the bodies of revolutionary power, it should be noted that the evolution of the latter was determined by the opposition of the reformist-minded elites and the revolutionary masses. That said, while the situation was mostly determined by the former during the initial six to eight weeks following the Revolution, the compromise reached in February meant that it was the latter that actually emerged victorious. Democratic transition was thus introduced into the new institutions, although leadership here was hogged by the Higher Authority, and regular people were thus excluded from the political process. From around April, NGOs, trade unions and other political parties were the main outlets for people to engage in the political life of the country.

## 7 Elections 2011

The Higher Authority's main task was to develop an entire legislative framework for elections to the Constituent Assembly. A number of issues need to be resolved: when to hold the elections; what voting system to use; what requirements would candidates have to satisfy in order to qualify, and so on. Discussions on these issues were drawn out and heated, and often had nothing to do with politics.

These elections were initially supposed to take place on July 24, that is, on the first Sunday exactly six months after the establishment of the Higher Authority. However, by later spring, it was already clear that July 24 was completely unrealistic—primarily for technical reasons.

On April 18, just two months after the Higher Authority commenced its work, a presidential decree was issued on the establishment of an independent electoral commission. The commission was supposed to include 16 people who had experience in holding elections and had not participated in the work of the RCD during the past six years. Its members were selected by the Higher Authority from among the candidates put forward by the trade-union organizations of magistrates, lawyers, notaries, journalists, human rights NGOs, university professors, etc.<sup>38</sup> The final list of members was published in a special presidential decree on May 20 after a month of deliberations.<sup>39</sup> The newly appointed commission was tasked with setting up local and regional electoral commissions, providing them with all the technical means to carry out their functions and, most importantly, draw up voter lists. In late May, the chairman of the commission asked the president to postpone the elections.

This was at least in part due to political motivations: as of early summer, the only relatively well-known parties in the country were Ennahda and the PDP, which opposed the delays, arguing that the situation in the country needed to be stabilized

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<sup>38</sup> See Footnote 37.

<sup>39</sup> See Footnote 37.

and suggesting that there was a “possible conspiracy” in the ranks of the Higher Authority. Ennahda even went as far as to suspend its membership in the Higher Authority, a move that was likely prompted by concerns about the party’s dirty laundry being aired in public (Chaker, 2011: 30).

The elections were nevertheless postponed, first until October 16, and then until October 23.

Deciding on the date of the elections was not the only sticking point, however, as the voting procedure itself was also a source of fierce debate. A decree was eventually issued on May 10. The preamble talked about the determination to break with the old regime “based on arbitrariness and disregard for the will of the people” and loyalty to the principles of the Revolution, which was aimed at establishing “the rule of law based on democracy, freedom, equality, social justice, dignity, pluralism, human rights, and the periodic peaceful change of power.”<sup>40</sup> This was perhaps the most complete official description of the goals of the Revolution.

The voting requirements and procedures were then described in detail. Elections were to be held in 27 constituencies (two each in the governates of Tunis, Nabeul and Sfax, and one in the rest) in accordance with the electoral lists (50% of the candidates in each constituency were to be women<sup>41</sup>), which could include representatives of political parties, trade unions, public organizations and independent candidates. People who had served in the Ben Ali cabinet (with the exception of those who were not members of the RCD), as well as leaders of the RCD, those who had put forward Ben Ali’s candidacy for the 2014 presidential elections, magistrates, diplomats and regional leaders were not allowed to stand for office. Every person in the country over the age of 18 was eligible to vote, with the exception of military personnel, those serving in the National Guard, and civilians carrying out their military service. In addition, those who had had their property seized following the fall of the regime, as well as convicted criminals and people who had served more than six months in prison, were not allowed to vote.

The decree also stated that a system of proportional representation would be used in the elections, which would give those candidates in smaller regions a better chance.

The presidential decree was carried out to the letter, although no one could have predicted how the election turned out.

Polls taken in September before the elections indicated that there would be an 83% turnout. Moreover, most people had decided who they were going to vote for: 25% said Ennahda; 16% said PDP; 14% said Ettakatol; 8% said the Congress for the Republic; with the remaining parties set to receive 3% of the votes or less.<sup>42</sup> None of this was particularly surprising and was more or less in line with what observers had predicted: political analysts had long since been saying that Tunisia is mostly free of serious Islamist sentiments. However, they failed to take into account the fact that, according to those very same polls, almost half of the respondents admitted that they were not 100% sure of their choice. Moreover, they ignored the fact that

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<sup>40</sup> See Footnote 37.

<sup>41</sup> Ennahda turned out to be an ardent supporter of this entirely feminist yet democratic demand.

<sup>42</sup> See Footnote 37.

Ennahda's electorate is not made up exclusively of Islamists. Far from it—there are also conservatives and a significant part of the politically passive population, who saw Ennahda as “the only party that at least does something.”

A total of 3,702,627 registered voters went to the polling stations on election day (October 23), with a further 500,000 voting using their ID cards. This amounted to a turnout of just 55%. Ennahda received 37% of the votes; its partner, the Congress for the Republic 8.7%; Ettakatol 7%; the PDP just 3.94%; Initiative 3.19%; the Democratic Modernist Pole 2.79%; Afek Tounes 1.89%; the PCOT 1.57%; and the Free Patriotic Union 1.36%. The Popular Petition came out of nowhere to win 6.74% of the votes; the party is led by London-based millionaire journalist and former Ennahda member Mohamed Hechmi Hamdi, owner of the Al Mustakillah television channel. Islamic forces (Ennahda, Congress for the Republic and Popular Petition) thus won more than 50% of the seats in the Constituent Assembly.<sup>43</sup>

The success of the Congress for the Republic and Popular Petition can likely be put down to the fact that their rhetoric was from the outset very much in line with that of Ennahda. And the strong showing of Ettakatol can be seen as a consequence of its relentless push since the overthrow of Ben Ali to be seen as “revolutionary” and “anti-West.” Meanwhile, there were several reasons for the crushing defeat of the other major parties: the demonstrative secularism of Ettatjid and its cooperation with left forces; its policy to involve former members of the RCD and attract the big-business PDP; the moderation of these parties; and their desire to turn the revolution into just a series of reforms.

The newly elected Constituent Assembly convened in November 2011. In its very first days, the three biggest parties (Ennahda, Congress for the Republic and Ettakatol) managed to isolate the remaining parties and unite as a ruling triumvirate. Moncef Marzouki fulfilled his January promise to become president. Ennahda Secretary General Hamadi Jebali was named Prime Minister, and Mustapha Ben Jafar was made Speaker of the Assembly. A parliamentary system was thus established in Tunisia (with the Constituent Assembly in place of a parliament).

## 8 Conclusion

The events that took place in Tunisia between December 17, 2010 and October 23, 2011 can generally be divided into two main phases: (1) December 17 to February 18; and (2) February 18 to October 23. The first was the phase of uprising, when the main political actor was the street. The street overthrew Ben Ali, achieved the dissolution of parliament and the RCD, and forced the resignation of two Mohamed Ghannouchi governments. The increasingly organized nature of the demonstrators, coupled with

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<sup>43</sup> The figures were later amended slightly: Ennahda (89 seats); Congress for the Republic (29 seats); Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (20 seats); Popular Petition (26 seats); PDP (16 seats); Democratic Modernist Pole (5 seats); National Destourian Initiative (5 seats); Afek Tounes (4 seats); and PCOT (3 seats).

the desire of a number of political forces to lead the Revolution, led to the creation of the National Council for the Defense of the Revolution, a fact that concretized the irreversibility of the political transformation. At the same time, the endless unrest, as well as the conflicts of interest and inconsistency in the actions of those involved in the National Council, combined with the increased political engagement of the moderately minded part of society in general, and the intellectual and political elites in particular, led to the formation of the Higher Authority—a body that personified public compromise and sought to legitimize the democratic transition.

The emergence of the Higher Authority marked the beginning of the second phase of the Revolution (February 18–October 23) and can be called the “reformist” phase. The gradual approach taken to the political process during these months resulted in it becoming more predictable and entrenched. Not only did this lull in activity make it possible for the main political forces in the country (parties, NGOs, etc.) to take shape both structurally and ideologically, but it also, more importantly, allowed positive aspirations for the country’s future to replace the previously negative process of “overthrowing the old order”.

Political strife continued, however, with radical Salafi Islamists assassinating tourists and government officials, precipitating another crisis in 2013–2014. In response to the public outcry in the face of rising violence, anxieties about the Islamization of the government, and political infighting, four major civil society groups formed the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet to guide the Ennahda-led Constituent Assembly and negotiate the necessary compromises and agreements to complete its work. These groups were the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT); the Tunisian Confederation of Industry Trade and Handicrafts, the Tunisian Human Rights League, and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers. Thanks to their perseverance, the Constituent Assembly completed its tasks, the interim government resigned, and new elections were held in 2014, completing the transition to a democratic state. The next year, the Quartet was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for “its decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia in the wake of the Tunisian Revolution of 2011”.

Tunisia’s first democratically elected president Beji Caid Essebsi died in July 2019. Kais Saied then became Tunisia’s next president after a landslide victory in the presidential election of October 2019.

Despite all the difficulties that Tunisia experienced in its revolutionary process, the country’s leaders and society demonstrated an ability to find a peaceful way forward, and to follow the difficult and often risky path towards building a democracy. So, as regards the way toward sustainable democracy, the Tunisian revolution appears to be the most successful among all the Arab Spring revolutions.<sup>44</sup>

To be sure, the Revolution is not yet over—it may have entered a third phase of autocratic government under the new President Kais Saied, who dissolved parliament in late 2021, claiming an economic emergency required decisive government. It remains to be seen whether Saied will keep power, and end the sole democratic

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<sup>44</sup> Cp. the Egypt case, see Chapter “[Revolutions, Counterrevolutions, and Democracy](#)” (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022a, in this volume).

outcome of the Arab Spring, or if he will be forced to call new elections and thus restore the Tunisian experiment in democracy. Revolutions, after all, can take decades to unfold, and the forces unleashed in the 2010-2011 uprising remain active.

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# Revolution in Libya



Yury Barmin

## 1 Internal and External Causes of the Libyan Revolution

### 1.1 Structural Economic Problems

On the eve of the revolution that started unfolding on February 15, 2011, on the surface Libya compared favorably with its neighbors Egypt and Tunisia, which were already engulfed in unrest.<sup>1</sup> By 2010 Libya had a higher per capita income, at \$16,430, as the GDP had almost quadrupled to \$93.2 billion from 1998 to 2009. Libyans also enjoyed a 95% literacy rate for men and a 74 year life expectancy (Crisis Group, 2011). Dominated by the massive oil industry, the Libyan economy was doing fairly well against the backdrop of economic hardships experienced by neighboring countries. Oil accounted for 65% of the country's GDP and 98% of the government's revenues in 2010 (African Development Bank, 2012). The oil industry being the driver of the Libyan economy in fact helped the country overcome the tumultuous years of the financial crisis of 2008–2009, during which Libya's export earnings doubled while allowing it to increase international reserves up to \$101 billion in 2010 (Khan & Mezran, 2013).

While the economy was seemingly doing well, the oil boom did not bring benefits throughout society. Instead, the underlying structural problems that affected the population had steadily accumulated by 2011, and were showing on the local level.

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<sup>1</sup>On revolutions in these countries see Chapter “[The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and the Birth of the Arab Spring Uprisings](#)” (Kuznetsov, 2022), Chapter “[The Arab Spring: Causes, Conditions, and Driving Forces](#)” (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022b), Chapter “[Egypt's 2011 Revolution. A Demographic Structural Analysis](#)” (Korotayev & Zinkina, 2022), and Chapter “[Revolutions, Counterrevolutions, and Democracy](#)” (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022a, in this volume).

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The private sector of the Libyan economy fell prey to the state-dominated energy sector. In fact, the government heavily regulated the economy in such a way that the emergence of a strong private sector outside the service industry was impossible.

Libya has traditionally relied on the public sector to create employment: in the mid-2000s over 70% of the formal workforce was absorbed by the public sector while the private sector only employed 4% of the labor force (World Bank, 2006). The rest of the population relied on informal work. Around 60% of the country's oil revenue went towards wages in the public sector, according to Libyan analysts.<sup>2</sup> What is more important, Libya was a classic example of an Arab country with a youth "bulge"<sup>3</sup> which resulted in high unemployment rates among young people. While the pre-revolution unemployment rate reached 14% in Libya, unemployment among the country's youth amounted to a staggering 30%. This disparity was impossible to even out due to structural flaws in the economy. With so much of the economy tied up in oil production and government jobs, there was no large or expanding private sector to provide opportunities. Moreover, the training that the younger generation received did not match the skills needed in the labor market. This is the reason why the Libyan government heavily relied on the expatriate population both for high- and low-skilled positions, which further propelled unemployment. At the same time, neither the government nor the private sector could provide adequate employment for the vastly increased volume of recent university graduates (the same problem was acute in Tunisia and Egypt).

The Libyan economy's core structural flaw was evidenced by the fact that the energy sector contributed 65% of Libya's GDP but employed only 3% of the formal workforce. State-operated public services, including healthcare and education, employed 51% of the workforce, but contributed only 9% to the country's GDP. Another problem that faced Libyans working in the public sector were low wages that were fixed under Law 15 of 1981, and which for the most part remained frozen up until the revolution in 2011 (Otman & Karlberg, 2007: 132). This forced many Libyans to work more than one job at a time, with their main employment being in the public sector while also working side jobs in the private or informal (shadow) sectors of the economy.

The lifting of international sanctions against Libya in 2003–2004 led to the revitalization of the country's oil industry but did not translate into economic opportunities for the population. Among other things, the problem of housing shortages was never seriously tackled by Gaddafi and by 2011 an additional 540,000 housing units needed to be introduced (Crisis Group, 2011). All factors considered, the Gaddafi regime was running a backward economy in Libya that failed to create opportunities for the younger generation, let alone fulfill their dream that their country could become a new Dubai (Stephen, 2015). Economic frustrations, however, were just part of a mosaic of factors, including tribal rivalries, the example of rebellion in Tunisia and

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<sup>2</sup> Estimates provided by Abdul Rahman Al Ageli.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter "The Arab Spring: Causes, Conditions, and Driving Forces" (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022b, in this volume) for more detail.

Egypt, the narrow clientelism of Gaddafi's regime, and Gaddafi's lengthy and erratic rule, that led to revolution and civil war.

## 1.2 Tribal Geography

Though Libya has a modern oil sector, much of its social organization (including the military) is based on tribal ties. Thus, as the Libyan revolution was unfolding in 2011, two opposite views were expressed with regard to the importance of the tribal factor in shaping the conflict. Some described the revolt as a tribal civil war and argued that the outcome would be determined by tribal loyalties, while others dismissed this view by arguing that the revolution had originated in Libya's urban centers where the tribal factor played little role (El-Doufani, 2011). Both of these points of view oversimplified the multifaceted nature of the conflict.

Out of the 140 tribes in Libya, only about 30 are influential. Tribes are an important factor outside large urban centers, and this is the reason why tribes, sub-tribes and extended families were seen as an important stabilizing factor in the post-revolution period. In the July 2012 elections most of the elected independent candidates represented the interests of individual cities, tribes and families.

Tribal dynamics in Libya have always been an integral part of the country's political landscape. Gaddafi's rule, however, exploited them and ultimately exacerbated the pre-existing rivalries among Libyan tribes. Under Muammar Gaddafi tribal networks went from being marginalized to reduce their influence on politics to being partially co-opted against the backdrop of deliberate weakening of state institutions by the regime. The transformation of Libya into an oil power further strengthened the clientelistic character of the regime in which some of the tribes loyal to the leader, first of all Gaddafi's own Qadhadhfah tribe, and also Warfallah as well as Magarha, formed the backbone of the regime's security institutions. They had materially benefited from their loyalty to Gaddaafi and ultimately ended up throwing their weight behind him after the February 17 revolution (2011). This explains why many districts dominated by pro-Gaddafi tribes in Libyan cities, such as "Number 2" and "Dollar" districts in Tripoli dominated by Warfallah as well as Qadhadhfah-dominated Fatah neighborhoods in Sabha, put up a strong resistance to revolt even when the outcome of the conflict was already clear (Lacher, 2012). Rebel attempts to rally the support of tribes traditionally allied with the Gaddafi regime ultimately failed. Even after the fall of Tripoli the remains of tribal loyalists were still fighting against the rebel movement in their strongholds of Bani Walid, Fezzan and Sirte. Some tribal leaders with a different degree of loyalty to Gaddafi withdrew their support for the regime, but even individual withdrawals of commitment to the regime from Warfallah (Varvelli, 2013) did not affect the general loyalty of the tribe to the regime.

The tribal factor in the Libyan Revolution did not have a uniform effect across the country and was most visible in the east, in Cyrenaica, where tribal structures were best preserved. Given Libya's geography and the large swathes of desert separating urban centers, Cyrenaica was often overlooked by the Gaddafi government. The two

major cities of the country, Tripoli (the national capital) in the west and Benghazi in the east, were connected by just one highway leaving the east almost isolated. Cyrenaica was also traditionally under Gaddafi's suspicion, due to the historic animosity between Gaddafi's own tribe of Qadhadhfeh and some of the larger tribes in the east (Blundy & Lycett, 1987: 34), as well as from the fact that the region was the seat of the Senussi monarchy that Gaddafi overthrew in 1969.

Coupled with poor development in Cyrenaica<sup>4</sup> the tribal factor became an amplifier that helped rebel sentiment catch on throughout the country's east, both in large cities and in rural areas. Often-times, however, the tribal factor just added another layer to a pre-existing conflict. Some analysts note that tribal rivalry in Libya is deeply rooted in historic memory. For instance, Ibrahim Freihat argues that the Zintan tribe of Tripolitania considered its tribal neighbor the Rayayneh to have been Gaddafi loyalists as well as collaborators with Italian colonists in the 1940s, which in the post-Gaddafi period became ground for reprisals against the Rayayneh (Freihat, 2016).

### ***1.3 Arab Spring Momentum***

The Arab Spring momentum in North Africa that was introduced by the revolution in Tunisia and later in Egypt evidently produced a domino effect in Libya at least to some extent, although there is no consensus on that among scholars. The fall of President Ben Ali in Tunisia on January 14 did impact public sentiment in Libya, and also factored into Muammar Gaddafi's preemptive tactical action as he sought to ride out the wave of growing discontent over economic hardships in the country.

While Libya did not suffer any significant protests in January 2011, Gaddafi produced several statements that clearly indicated his concern over events in neighboring countries. First, on January 16, he made a speech expressing his support for President Ben Ali and calling on Tunisians to "bring him back" (BBC, 2011). Later, on January 26, Gaddafi made a speech in which he expressed discontent with the housing shortage in the country and invited the youth to take what rightfully belonged to them, which resulted in hundreds of Libyans occupying empty housing units. This was seen as Gaddafi's attempt to hijack the grievances of Libyans by presenting them as his own cause and this was a strong enough indication that the situation in Libya was slowly unraveling.

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<sup>4</sup> One of the facts often cited to illustrate Cyrenaica's run-down state under the Gaddafi regime is the fact that Benghazi, Libya's second largest city of one million people, had only one sewage treatment plant built in the seventies, while most waste used to be flushed straight into the sea or the city's lake (see Time, 2011).

## 2 Socio-political Base of the Revolution and Its Drivers

Youth played a key role in bringing about the revolution and was a distinct demographic of the uprising (as in many revolutions in the twenty-first century<sup>5</sup>). Most of them came from the middle and lower classes of the society, and many of them struggled to find adequate employment. The spontaneous unrest of the first days of the revolution was by and large led by this demographic group. In the absence of political parties and formalized opposition structures during the Gaddafi era, the revolt did not gravitate to any specific group with a political agenda. After the initial protest revolutionaries moved on to set up committees and political structures in towns and cities to deal with the day-to-day functioning of the state, which brought to the fore more technocrats and defecting government officials.

The National Transitional Council was set up to oversee a transition towards a democratic form of governance on February 26. The NTC's main bodies that acted as a de-facto government were led by technocrats and defected politicians from the General People's Committee, the executive branch of the Gaddafi government. These included Mustafa Abdel Jalil, former justice minister, and Mahmoud Jibril, former head of the National Planning Council, who were both part of the softer reformist-minded circles close to Gaddafi's son Saif Al Islam. Libyan expatriates who returned to the country as the revolution was unfolding joined the NTC, as well as representatives of newly formed city councils from Cyrenaica and rebel-held cities in the west of the country.

Defectors from the regime-associated institutions also presented a distinct group of opposition members who made up a prominent part of the revolt's leadership. Some of the defectors included members of the government, military and security personnel as well as diplomats, such as Foreign Affairs Secretary Musa Kusa and UN Ambassador Abdel-Rahman Shalgam. A majority of defections came from the eastern part of the country.

Given the fact that political parties were banned in Libya, a number of political organizations led by Libyans existed only outside the country. On the eve of the revolution and during the civil war they increased their activity in support of the revolt. While the likes of the National Conference for the Libyan Opposition, the National Front for the Salvation of Libya and the Libyan League for Human Rights did not play any major role in the revolution, they became its staunch supporters.

The Islamic current in Libya, although deeply suppressed by the Gaddafi regime during his reign, was split during the revolution. The Muslim Brotherhood, whose members had been historically persecuted by the Gaddafi government or were in exile, had no significance in Libya at the time of the revolution. It was largely ignored until Saif Al Islam's initiatives to build dialogue with Libyan Islamist groups in order to co-opt and neutralize them. Without any tangible presence on Libyan soil during

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<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Chapter "The 'Color' Revolutions. Successes and Limitations of Non-violent Protest" (Mitchell, 2022, in this volume).

the revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood had no role to play but came out strongly against the regime (Ashour, 2012).

The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)—an organization that first emerged in the 1970s and was battle-hardened in Afghanistan, and which led a low-level insurgency in eastern Libya in the 1990s—had a more significant role to play in the Libyan Revolution. LIFG was the only force in Libya that had had prior success in rallying support against Gaddafi, for which it was disbanded and its leaders imprisoned. Despite the dialogue that had begun between LIFG and Saif Al Islam in the mid-2000s, the organization threw its weight behind the revolution and brought an abundance of insurgency techniques into the rebel movement (Ashour, 2015). Various groups and theologians of the conservative Salafi-leaning Islamists, which had been allowed to grow under the Gaddafi regime, on the contrary opposed the revolution and were in fact used by the government to produce religious legitimization of the regime.

### 3 The Timeline of the Libyan Revolution

The initial protest gained momentum around a call for demonstrations by the National Conference for the Libyan Opposition exiled in London. The organization called on Libyans to take to the streets to celebrate the Day of Rage on February 17, 2011, the date originally associated with another anti-Gaddafi protest in 2006 (Asharq Al Awsat, 2011). Gaddafi's reaction to the announcement was two-faceted: he released twelve political prisoners trying to take a conciliatory stance, but also sent the special forces commander to Benghazi who ultimately stirred more anger among local activists. The subsequent arrest of a well-known young human rights activist, Fathi Tebril, who represented families of over a thousand political prisoners massacred in Tripoli's prison in 1996, became the trigger that sparked a protest in Benghazi on February 15, two days before the originally planned rally (Anderson, 2011).

Clashes between security forces and demonstrators that were at first non-lethal turned deadly on February 17 with over 230 people killed by the security forces, who in the days to follow also targeted funeral processions that drew thousands of locals in Benghazi (HRW, 2011). The take-over of the barracks of the elite Khamis Brigade by protesters after a three-day siege on February 20, which was aided by the recently defected Interior Minister and Gaddafi's close associate Abdel Fatah Younis, became a turning point in the revolution and ended Tripoli's control over Benghazi. The protest quickly spread throughout Cyrenaica to major urban centers along the coast: Tobruk, Derna, Al Bayda as well as Brega, the second largest oil production facility in the country (Schemm, 2011).

By February 22, when it was clear that the government had lost control of Cyrenaica, protests started seeping into Tripolitania with occasional clashes in Tripoli, Misrata and Zawiyah; the latter hosts Libya's second-largest oil refinery. Misrata along with Benghazi became one of the major centers of resistance, especially given the fact that it was located in Tripolitania. After the take-over of the city, rebels set up

the Misrata City Council and Military Council to organize their defense and service provision. The City Council also sent a representative to the NTC, thus joining the Cyrenaica-based opposition (Abbas, 2011).

In early March, Gaddafi began a counter-offensive. In the East, Gaddafi's troops laid siege to the rebel-held town of Misrata, and crushed the local opposition movement around Zawiyah near Tripoli on March 11, after two weeks of fierce resistance (Walt, 2011). Loyalist forces in the West also started pushing back against poorly-equipped rebels in Bin Jawad, a town close to Gaddafi's native Sirte, and by March 19 had reached Benghazi, re-capturing towns along the coast (Raghavan, 2011). The assault on Benghazi threatened to become a massacre, but it was short-lived as the French and US governments, authorized by the UN Security Council under UN resolution 1973, started their military operation (Operation Odyssey Dawn) targeting Gaddafi's forces outside Benghazi (Murphy, 2011) and allowing the rebels to regain control of Cyrenaica's cities.

On March 17, just before Gaddafi's counter-offensive had established itself at Benghazi, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1973 after weeks of deliberations. The resolution established a no-fly zone over Libya as well as gave Security Council members the authority to use "all necessary measures" to protect civilians in Libya (United Nations Security Council, 2011). The international intervention first led by the US and later under NATO command prevented the fall of Benghazi into Gaddafi's hands, which would have choked the rebel movement. The intervention threw the loyalists back and gave the rebels time to regroup, but the fighting in Cyrenaica remained stalemated from late March well into July, with back and forth territorial exchanges between the Gaddafi forces and rebels. On July 15, 2011, the rebel forces—largely aided by Qatari shipments of weapons and military advisors (Black et al., 2011)—finally broke through and permanently dislodged the loyalist forces from their strongholds and forced them to retreat to Sirte.

The Gaddafi regime's siege of Misrata had left the city with almost no supplies, but by late March NATO's assistance at sea established a connection between Benghazi and Misrata resulting in arms and food deliveries (Chivers, 2011). After unsuccessful attempts to capture the Misratan port in April, the regime completely withdrew from the area by May 15 ending the three-month siege.

The liberation of Misrata meant that Tripoli, Gaddafi's stronghold, was no longer safe, as it was threatened from Misrata and the Nafusa Mountains, which had given refuge to rebels who had fled from Zawiyah. Throughout the summer, several attempts at negotiations were made, including ones proposed by the African Union, Russia and the European powers, however, all of them yielded no results, not least because in late August rebel groups from the Nafusa Mountains successfully pushed back against Gaddafi forces, first recapturing Zawiyah on August 20 and advancing towards Tripoli (Price, 2011).

Forces from Misrata and Nafusa opened three fronts around Tripoli, essentially encircling the city. On August 22, rebels captured Gaddafi's compound in Tripoli Bab Al Aziziyah, however, the Libyan leader was not there (Fahim, 2011). Throughout September rebels were clearing the remaining loyalist strongholds in Sebha, coastal Ras Lanuf and Bin Jawad. Gaddafi's native Sirte remained the last loyalist city which

rebels hoped to take under their control by negotiating with the Qadhahfah tribe. However, when these attempts failed an offensive was launched and by October 16 there were only two Gaddafi loyalist holdouts left in Sirte (El Gamal & Gaynor, 2011). Four days later a NATO airstrike outside Sirte targeted a fleeing military convoy that carried Muammar Gaddafi. Wounded by rebels who captured him, Gaddafi died on the way to a hospital in Misrata. On October 23, the NTC declared the liberation of Libya and announced its transition plan. The UN Security Council voted to end the mandate permitting the military campaign in Libya while leaving the sanctions and arms embargo in place on October 27 (CNN, 2011).

#### 4 Key Demands of the Opposition

Given the spontaneous nature of the protests that originated in Benghazi and spread to various locations across the country, demands by the opposition also varied across the localities. However, one demand that was universally shared in Libya was the departure of Muammar Gaddafi from power. The demand meant, however, not only the removal of an individual from power but the deconstruction of the regime and the government that were uniquely based on his personality.

Absence of agency for the Libyan people in the political life of the country and the lack of political parties in the country meant that there was no clear opposition ideological ground per se behind the revolt. It is illustrated by the fact that one of the demands voiced during the protests in Benghazi was the return to the 1951 constitution that Gaddafi abolished upon coming to power in 1969. In some locations across Cyrenaica protesters were carrying an Idris-era Libyan flag (The Economist, 2011), which highlights that what initially emerged as a spontaneous revolt at first had no clear-cut vision for the future.

A month and a half into the revolution, on March 29, the National Transitional Council issued its “Vision of a Democratic Libya”, an eight-point document that laid out its aspirations for a new Libya. The document summed up the demands of the revolution to Gaddafi and called for the drafting of a national constitution that would establish “legal, political, civil, legislative, executive and judicial institutions (The Interim National Council, 2011).” The introduction of state institutions that have a clear mandate and establishing the rule of law in Libya were the main demands declared by the revolution. While the document called for the creation of a state modeled on the principles of constitutional democracies, it was much less clear on the role of religion, stipulating that the state would derive “strength from our strong religious beliefs in peace, truth, justice and equality” and would respect “the sanctity of religious doctrine.”

## 5 Explaining the Longevity of Gaddafi's Resistance

The weakness of state institutions and of the Libyan army became a double-edged sword for Gaddafi. The Libyan state allowed little public participation in governance despite the fact every Libyan had to participate in the work of congresses that worked out plans and demands to the government and passed them upwards to the General People's Congress. Only 10% of the population opted to participate in this mechanism regularly and 70% found it ineffective (Obeidi, 2001: 159). Absent political parties and real popular agency in governance, the only effective mechanism of mobilizing the population and co-opting it was often times through tribes. This allowed Gaddafi to have enough tribal leaders with vested interests in his regime that were ready to throw their weight behind him even during the revolution, simply because their survival depended on the survival of Muammar Gaddafi.

On the other hand, a civil society vacuum in Libya during the Gaddafi era drove the pre-existing antagonisms down to the tribal and ethnic levels, deep into the society. This argument could be extrapolated historically, interpreting the 1969 revolution as the revenge of central Libyan tribes against the eastern Cyrenaica tribes from which the Sanussi monarchy had come. In other words, the cementation and instrumentalization of tribal divides by Gaddafi created an added complexity to the Libyan civil war but allowed him to survive through the early stages of the revolution.

A similar argument could be applied to assess the role of the Libyan military in the survival of the regime during the revolution. Throughout the forty-year rule of Muammar Gaddafi the Libyan army was deliberately kept weak and divided in order to prevent a coup from happening, which created a great deal of animosity within the army ranks towards the Libyan leadership. Regular forces, whose power had been routed during the 1980s war with Chad, comprised an estimated 25,000 ground forces but were chronically under-equipped and poorly trained. However, the core of the Libyan security apparatus was formed around revolutionary committees and elite units that were better equipped and controlled either by loyal individuals from the three staunchly pro-Gaddafi tribes or by his own sons. The four loyal brigades, including the elite 32nd Armored Brigade led by Gaddafi's son Khamis, had an estimated 10,000 servicemen.

Arguably the absence of a strong unified army in Libya that could act as a buffer between the regime and protesters allowed Gaddafi to use the engineered split in the security sector to his benefit. The nexus of tribal loyalties and elite army units led to the emergence of a loyal force but it also drove the regular army away from the regime, particularly in Benghazi, which ultimately contributed to the fall of the cradle of the revolution (Joffe, 2011).

## 6 Libyan Revolution in the Context of the Arab Spring

Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt were what many experts called revolutions in liberalized autocracies, where regimes allowed the emergence of civil society institutions that later played a key role in directing the course of the events (Brumberg, 2011). In the case of Libya, however, there was no regime-led liberalization going on even despite the attempts undertaken by Gaddafi's second son Saif Al Islam in the mid-2000s. Libya was a highly personalized autocracy where the entire political system revolved around Muammar Gaddafi even though he had no formal role to play inside the political process. According to George Joffe, liberalized autocracies in Tunisia and Egypt set up conditions for their demise by allowing social movements to develop under international political pressure, which eventually grew into "movements of political contention, (Joffe, 2011)" which was never the case in Libya where the autonomous public space was never authorized to take off.<sup>6</sup>

The splits in the Libyan military and the regional and tribal divisions in Libya generated different dynamics in the revolutionary process than in Tunisia or Egypt. In Tunisia, the regular army was little used and remained in its barracks rather than defend the corrupt ben Ali regime; the protestors thus mainly had to deal with the regime's police forces, which were not able to put down the massive urban protests. In Egypt the military was strong and cohesive, but estranged from President Mubarak's by the latter's plans to put his son, not a military officer, next in line of succession. The military thus first stood aside when urban protestors confronted the police, and then protected the protestors. But before long, the military flexed its unity and superior organization and managed, through a popular counter-revolutionary coup, to take control of the government. In Libya, the military was divided between the loyalist tribal and family-led units who fought for the regime, and the regular military, much of it based in the east or associated with rival tribes, who defected to the rebellion. The defection of a part of the Libyan army gave a momentum to the protest movement, and had there been no defections happening in Benghazi in February 2011, the protest could have arguably choked.

In Egypt and Tunisia, where state institutions existed prior to and separate from the state leaders, revolutionary groups could mobilize to contest for control of the state, and after the overthrow of Mubarak and ben Ali political parties could mobilize supporters to contend for power. By contrast, in Libya state institutions were extremely weak and wholly wrapped up in the personal regime of Muammar Gaddafi.

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<sup>6</sup> On the revolutions of the Arab Spring, their common features and peculiarities see Grinin et al. (2016), Grinin et al. (2019), as well as Chapter "Introduction. Changing yet Persistent: Revolutions and Revolutionary Events" (Goldstone et al., 2022), Chapter "The Arab Spring: Causes, Conditions, and Driving Forces" (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022b), Chapter "The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and the Birth of the Arab Spring Uprisings" (Kuznetsov, 2022), Chapter "Egypt's 2011 Revolution. A Demographic Structural Analysis" (Korotayev & Zinkina, 2022), Chapter "The Arab Spring in Yemen" (Issaev et al., 2022), Chapter "The Syrian Revolution" (Akhmedov, 2022), Chapter "The Extent of Military Involvement in Non-violent, Civilian Revolts and Their Aftermath" (Rasler & Thompson, 2022), Chapter "The Arab Spring. A Quantitative Analysis" (Korotayev et al., 2022a) and Chapter "Global Echo of the Arab Spring" (Korotayev et al., 2022b, in this volume).

When Gaddafi was overthrown, the result was that rival military and tribal groups fought for control of territory, particularly the oil-producing regions, while state institutions remained weak and largely ineffectual. While the opposition may have aspired to create a “color revolution” to establish a constitutional, democratic state, their efforts were frustrated by the lack of any viable state institutions, and the absence of political parties and civil society organizations, with which to build toward that outcome.<sup>7</sup>

To this date, June 2021, the national government in Tripoli (the Government of National Accord or GNA) still controls only about half the country, while the military warlord Khalifa Haftar, chief of the self-styled Libyan National Army, controls much of Cyrenaica. International actors have gotten engaged again, but this time it is not the U.S. or NATO (who withdrew almost immediately after Gaddafi’s death). Rather, it is Russia and Turkey, who are seeking influence by backing different sides and helping to prolong the civil war that has divided the country. Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are backing Haftar, while Turkey and Qatar are supporting the GNA. But so far, they have only created a standoff, with periodic offensives and cease-fires, but little progress toward peace or a truly national government.

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<sup>7</sup> On the possible long-term negative consequences of democratic revolutions in unprepared for democracy countries see Chapter “Revolutions, Counterrevolutions, and Democracy” (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022a), Chapter “The Arab Spring: Causes, Conditions, and Driving Forces” (Grinin & Korotayev, 2022b), Chapter “Revolutions and Historical Process” (Grinin, 2022), and Chapter “Revolutionary Waves and Lines of the Twentieth Century” (Grinin & Grinin, 2022, in this volume).

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