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Do Political Dynamics Travel?
Political Liberalization in the Arab World

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Abstract

This paper places the Arab world in a broader comparative context. It shows how political trends in the Arab world follow two patterns of political liberalization: liberalization and backlash, and a fluctuation between limited liberalization and deliberalization. It then shows how the latter pattern of change raises questions about the explanatory frameworks that are currently used to understand regime change and which have been applied to the Arab world. Thereafter, it offers an interpretation of the weak moderate opposition relative to the radical one as a factor that reverses the liberalization dynamics as conceptualized in the transition literature. This weakness leads the moderate opposition to collude with the hard-liners in the regime, sustaining in this way the authoritarian regime rather than undermining it. Finally, it is argued that this interpretation questions the idea of a continuum of liberalization and pleads for making an epistemological shift from the study of transition to the study of regimes transformations.

Most Arab regimes have undergone political change since the early 1990s. Electoral competition and multi-party activity, adopted early in Egypt (1976), has become a feature of the politics of Algeria (1990), Jordan (1989, 1993), Kuwait (1992), Lebanon (1992), Morocco (1992, 1993), Sudan (1986), Tunisia (1989), and Yemen (1993).¹ For a region long dominated by overtly authoritarian regimes, it seems that these changes point to a significant departure. Nonetheless, divergent interpretations of these changes can be made. On the one hand, it is possible to see them as part of a genuine process of regime change. In this optimistic reading Arab countries would be joining the third wave of democratization. This is not, however, the only possible interpretation of events in the Arab world. Indeed, it is necessary in fact to consider whether it makes more sense to view these elections as orchestrated by the authoritarian regimes in order to provide a democratic gloss to their country.

This paper considers which interpretation of recent changes in Arab regimes is most appropriate. This question is important in that it determines how the Arab world should be compared to other regions of the world. Indeed, because studies of regimes have focused to a large extent on Europe, Latin America, and Post-Communist cases, it is valuable to place the Arab world in the broader comparative context analyzed in this literature. But an interpretation of recent changes in Arab regimes is not only important in terms of descriptive understanding of political trends. As I show, an analysis of political trends in the Arab world also raises questions about the explanatory frameworks that are currently used to understand regime change and that have been applied to the Arab world.

I develop my argument in three parts. In the first section, recent political trends in the Arab world are analyzed. I advance the argument that, overall, political changes are best interpreted as limited reforms, aimed at liberalization, but not democratization. Moreover, I argue that important variations along the line of liberalization characterize these political regimes. Two different patterns of change are identified: in some countries liberalization has led to a backlash, while in others liberalization has fluctuated between limited liberalization and

¹ Only the date of the first elections in a multi-party system is given. Other elections in a multi-party system have taken place in each country since the first ones. Besides, the date mentioned here does not imply that the country has never known reasonably free and fair elections in a multi-party system before, such as Egypt (from 1923 to 1952), Iraq (from 1925 to 1958), Jordan (1957, 1967), Lebanon (from 1943 to 1975), Morocco (1962-1965), Sudan (prior to independence in 1953 to 1958, and from 1965 to 1969), and Syria (from 1923 to 1952). According to Salamé, Arab countries have known two “liberal moments” in the past (Salamé 1991), and if we are to interpret the latest political changes in the Arab countries as moves towards democratization, this will represent, historically speaking, the third “liberal moment” after the first Egyptian-Ottoman one before 1914, and the second one experienced in some Arab countries between the two world wars.

deliberalization. Thereafter, I discuss the addition of Arab countries to the comparative framework elaborated in the transition literature. I argue that because the transition literature conceives of liberalization as an inherently unstable policy, it tends to frame cases of limited liberalization in teleological terms, as blocked transitions. Moreover, I identify conditions that were common in East European and Latin American transitions and went overlooked, namely, all had relatively strong and democratic opposition movements. Finally, I contribute to this literature by investigating the impact of greater variation on this factor. I contend that the collusion of part of the moderate opposition and the hard-liners leading to a reversal of the liberalization dynamics into dynamics that sustain the authoritarian regime rather than undermining it, is indeed possible under the condition of a strong radical opposition relative to the moderate one. Moreover, I argue that such pattern of liberalization questions the idea of a continuum of liberalization and pleads for making an epistemological shift from the study of transition to the study of regime transformations.

I. Assessing Political Change in the Arab World

An assessment of political trends in the Arab world reveals one basic fact: the political changes that have swept through the Arab world since the early 1990s have introduced a distinction between cases that have experienced virtually no changes of importance that bring into question the nature of the political regime and those cases that, on the contrary, have (see Table 1). Beyond this broad distinction, however, a key issue that emerges is whether those cases that have experienced political change might best be characterized as undergoing a process of political liberalization or democratization, or to put it differently, whether there are changes *within* the authoritarian regime which fall short of bringing about a change *of* regime, or changes of the very nature of the regime, which thus ceases to be authoritarian and becomes democratic.

Table 1. Political change in seventeen countries of the Arab world until the year 2000.

Change	Algeria – Egypt – Jordan – Kuwait – Lebanon - Morocco – Sudan – Tunisia - Yemen.
No Change	Bahrain – Iraq – Libya – Oman – Qatar – Saudi Arabia – Syria- United Arab Emirates.

Sources: Brynen and al. (1998a), Salamé (1995), Ayubi (1995).

In order to assess political change in the Arab world for the period starting from the late 1980s, except for the case of Egypt which starts from the 1970s, until the year 2000, I use the concepts of political liberalization and democratization as defined by O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986). Liberalization is “the process of making effective certain rights that protect both individuals and social groups from arbitrary or illegal acts committed by state or third parties. On the level of individual, these guarantees include the classical elements of the liberal tradition ... On the level of groups, these rights cover such thing as freedom of punishment for expressions of collective dissent from government policy, freedom from censorship of the means of communication, and freedom to associate voluntarily with other citizens” (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 7). My measure of liberalization is restricted to those liberal rights that are distinctively political. I adopt three of the eight criteria listed by Robert Dahl (Dahl 1971: 3): freedom to join and form organizations, freedom of expression, and existence of alternative sources of information.

Democratization “refers to the process whereby the rules and procedures of citizenship are either applied to political institutions previously governed by other principles ... or expanded to include persons not previously enjoying such rights and obligations ... or extended to cover issues and institutions not previously subject to citizen participation” (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 8). Democratization measures the right for citizens to hold their rulers accountable. I adopt five of the eight criteria listed by Robert Dahl (Dahl 1971: 3): right to vote, eligibility for public office, right of political leaders to compete for support, free and fair elections, institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference.

While I have defined minimum criteria for assessing liberalization and democratization, I believe that coding each criterion one by one in each case may simplify these processes so as to lead to erroneous evaluations. I have chosen the narrative method of process tracing which allows for more flexibility in introducing new criteria that, although not present in all cases, might have been important for liberalization and democratization in some.

In all the nine cases of political change - Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon,² Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen – liberalization has not led to successful democratization. As analysts have observed, “much of the region has experienced significant liberalization in the past two decades and much smaller degrees of democratic reform. The result is a state of *ta'addudiyya*, in which degrees of political pluralism exist, but meaningful political participation and

² The case of Lebanon presents the particularity of limited sovereignty because of the widespread Syrian influence on its internal affairs. Rustow considered that national unity is the “background condition” for any transition to democracy to succeed. In his words, “the vast majority of citizens in a democracy-to-be must have no doubt or mental reservations as to which political community they belong to” (Rustow 1970, reedited in 1999: 26).

accountability is generally absent from the policy process” (Brynen et al. 1998b: 277). The dominant trend, thus, has been “the emergence of *ta'addudiyya* (pluralism, albeit in constrained form, or multipartyism) without *dimuqratiyya* (democracy)” (Brynen et al. 1998b: 268). However, as the following analysis of these nine cases shows, there are some significant variations within this broad pattern.³

Liberalization and backlash: Algeria (1989-1992), Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen

One distinctive path, followed by Algeria (1989-1992), Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen, is the initiation of political liberalization followed by a setback to a repressive authoritarian system.

Algeria (1989-1992)

Liberalization: In November 1988 and February 1989, two referendums were organized by the Algerian government for the adoption of the revision of the 1976 constitution. This revision included two substantial changes: abandonment of socialism, and separation of the state and the only party, *Front de Libération National* (National Liberation Front). Regarding democratization, the new constitution enhanced the power of the Parliament. Regarding civil liberties, the new constitution introduced freedom of expression, of association (article 39), freedom to form trade unions (article 53), and the right to strike (article 54). This legal framework opened the door to an explosion of associative activities (7350 associations were counted in 1991⁴), and the formation or *reformation* of political parties. These rights were not only legal but also guaranteed on the ground. Moreover, political leaders in exile were allowed to come back to the country and form political parties (former President Ahmad Ben Bella, Hocine Aït Ahmed).

Backlash: In 1990, municipal and departmental elections were organized. These resulted in a resounding victory of the *Front Islamique du Salut* (Islamic Front for Salvation, FIS). In December 1991, the first round of legislative elections resulted in the FIS supremacy with 47.27% of the votes. A military coup and the abolition of the second round of legislative elections followed. In this sense, it could be said that the founding elections, and with it the democratization process, was interrupted in Algeria. A state of emergency was declared and a High State Command (HCE) was established until 1995. Between 1992 and 1995, the FIS party and its affiliated trade unions were outlawed. This ban did

³ As this is a large and limited comparison, each case study is open to refinement by country specialists with extensive knowledge of the countries included in this study. In each case study, I took the liberty of not constantly citing the source used. For each country, I have used the case studies found in Brynen et al. (1998a), Ayubi (1995: 415-446), Goldblatt et al. (1997: 321-366), CIA factbook (<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook>), and International Foundation for Electoral Systems (<http://www.ifes.org>).

⁴ See Beaudet and Moussa (1995).

not concern the rest of the parties and associations in the country. However, civil liberties were highly restricted by the armed confrontation between the army and armed Islamist⁵ groups.

Sudan

Liberalization: In April 1985, colonel Ja'far al-Numayri, who had ruled Sudan since 1969, was overthrown. The National Alliance, comprising all the underground unions and parties, adopted a charter for National Salvation which insisted on democracy, the rule of law, and freedom of organization, expression, and belief. Political parties reorganized for the legislative elections to be held in spring 1986. However, the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM), the main political-military movement of the south, boycotted the elections. It criticized the transitional government for not annulling al-Numayri's Islamic codes and called for a political system allowing African peoples from the south to share in policymaking. As a result, the south was under-represented at the legislative elections.

Backlash: In June 1989, the National Islamic Front (NIF) organized a coup with the support of a small group of officers. Political parties, autonomous professional associations, trade unions, as well as all non-NIF associations were banned.

Tunisia

Liberalization: Tunisia saw a timid political liberalization at the beginning of the 1980s, materialized by the lift of the ban on the Tunisian Communist Party (Parti Communiste Tunisien, PCT) in 1981, and the recognition in 1983 of the Movement of Socio-democrats, (Mouvement des Démocrates –Sociaux, MDS) and the Movement of Popular Unity (Mouvement de l'unité Populaire, MUP II). However, clear advances in political liberalization did not occur until 1987, after the accession to power of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who organized a “constitutional” coup to remove former President Bourguiba. The new Tunisian president Ben Ali claimed the anti-democratic character of the former regime and officially proclaimed his intention to bring about the rule of law and democracy in Tunisia. The constitutional amendment of July 1988 abolishing life-presidency and succession by the Prime Minister illustrates the will of the new regime to bring about a democratically oriented change. In May 1988, political prisoners, including the Islamist opponent Rached Ghannouchi, were liberated and political leaders in exile were allowed to enter Tunisian territory. The law guaranteed public liberties and notably the freedom of press and associations. A law allowing the formation of political parties was adopted, albeit forbidding their use of any religious reference. Previous exceptional jurisdictions were abolished and the power of the police limited by law. Torture

⁵ I use the adjective “Islamist” rather than “Islamic” to highlight the fact that organizations that are referred to are *political* and not *religious* organizations. I define Islamist organizations as political organizations that are committed to the goal of Islamic state and society, regardless of how these concepts are interpreted or understood.

was legally outlawed and the Tunisian section of Amnesty International was legally recognized. In November 1988, all the political parties and associations, including the illegal Islamist movement Al-Nahda (Renaissance), signed a "National Pact." This pact emphasized pluralism, democracy, and the rule of Law.

Backlash: From 1990 to the present, the Tunisian government has opted for a repressive strategy regarding the Islamist movement that has resulted in the restriction of civil liberties. The security services have been expanded and new laws passed restricting the freedom of the press and the media and controlling the right of association. This evolution is officially justified on the grounds that Islamist movements represent a threat to the Tunisian State. And since 1992, the catastrophic situation of Algeria has been taken as an example to justify the repressive policies of the Tunisian government towards political opponents, and associations such as human rights associations. Moreover, the president Ben Ali has concentrated power in his hands and the recent revision of the constitution instituting life-presidency is a very good case in point.

Yemen

Liberalization: In May 1990, the two Yemens (Yemen Arab Republic or North Yemen, and People's Democratic Republic or South Yemen) united. The leaders of the two countries agreed to share power equally in the transition institutions. A constitution accompanied by a bill of rights was adopted by referendum one year later. This constitution guaranteed universal suffrage, the freedom of expression, the freedom of belief, and the freedom of association. A party law legalized political parties. And parliamentary elections were scheduled for 1992. However, the elections were postponed because the parties failed to resolve the question of the share of representation between southerners and northerners.

In September 1992, political parties, trade unions, associations, and independent personalities participated in a National Conference where they agreed on a Code of Political Conduct. This Code called for democracy and civil liberties.

In 1993, parliamentary elections were organized and were followed by the coalition of three parties: the General People's Congress (GPC, former party of the north), the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP, former party of the south), and the Islamist party Islah (Reform party). However, because no party won a clear national majority, the delicate question of dividing the seats on the five-person Presidential Council was left open.

Backlash: The tension between the north and the south resulted in a civil war in 1994, which was won by the north. After the war, Northern soldiers were stationed in the south and many violations of human rights were registered as a result of this de facto occupation. The constitution was amended by the GPC to replace the executive council by a strong presidency and establish an upper house appointed by the President. The GPC and Islah had been in coalition from

the end of the war to the legislative elections of 1997 won by president Salih's GPC.

Liberalization and Unsuccessful democratization: Algeria (1995-present), Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Kuwait

A second path followed by Algeria (1995 to the present), Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and to a lesser extent Kuwait is a fluctuation between limited political liberalization and deliberalization.

Algeria (1995-present)

Fluctuation between Limited Liberalization and Deliberalization: From 1995 to 1999, political liberalization was revived by a succession of elections (1995: presidential elections, 1996: referendum for the ratification of the constitution, 1997: legislative and municipal elections, June 1999: presidential elections, September 1999: referendum for the adoption of an amnesty law, *Concorde Civile*) that allowed for the reorganization and the remobilization of the legalized political parties. This liberalization is controlled by the regime and the FIS as well as its affiliated trade unions are still outlawed. Moreover, following the adoption of the *Concorde Civile* law, many political prisoners were liberated.

Unsuccessful Democratization: Despite legislative and presidential elections, it could be said that progress toward democratization is non-existent. For example, the revision of the constitution in 1996 limited considerably the power of the national assembly by instituting a non-democratic upper house with a veto power. Moreover, elections have been characterized by widespread irregularities. In addition, the Algerian army has a de facto control of political life in general and the presidency in particular.

Egypt

Fluctuation between Limited Liberalization and Deliberalization: Progress in political liberalization was materialized in the abolition of law 32 (1964) limiting the freedom of voluntary associations. Between 1970 and 1980 the number of associations grew: business groups from 26 to 40, professional groups from 36 to 68, and cultural organizations from 86 to 215. The multiparty system was formally established when President Sadat decided to establish three *manabir* ("platforms" and not officially parties) within the only existing party, the Arab Socialist Union (ASU). These *fora* were the right (the liberals), the center (Egypt Arab Socialist forum), and the left (National Progressive Unionist party), and they participated in the 1976 legislative elections. A law legalizing political parties followed in June 1977 (Law n°40-1977). This law also set the conditions for the creation of new parties.

After the assassination of president Sadat in October 1981, Husni Mubarak became president of Egypt. From 1981 up to the present time, political liberalization has known advances as well as limits. The advances are important. First, the judiciary increasingly limited state power by protecting the political

process: in 1984 a court decision changed the election law to allow independents to run; the judiciary also interfered with many negative decisions of the Political Parties' Committee to allow the legalization of many political parties. Second, the number of political parties increased: from 4 in 1979 to 14 in the 1990s. Third, freedom of the press and of speech increased. Fourth, although the People's Assembly (*Majlis al-Sha'b*) has very limited power, the organization of five parliamentary elections (1984, 1987, 1990, 1995, 2000) has allowed the participation and competition of all the legalized parties. The limits of political liberalization are equally important: they range from legal limits, such as Law 100 (1993), which regulates and tightens the control of elections within voluntary associations, to unofficial intimidation exerted by the government on associations and political parties, for example, through periodic arrests or police visits. The main limits to liberalization are twofold. First, the continuation for over fifteen years of Emergency Law. Second, the constitutional ban on religious-based parties that hits one of the main Egyptian opposition parties, the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite this official ban, this organization joined a coalition with the legal party New Wafd in the 1984 legislative elections and with the Labor party in 1987. However, in the 1990s Mubarak adopted harsher measures against Islamic organizations. In 1989, over 10,000 Islamist militants were arrested, some of who were held without charge and tortured. These measures were first directed at Islamist organizations considered by the Egyptian government to be terrorist organizations, such as the Gamaa Islamiya. Rapidly, they were extended to the Muslim Brotherhood organization, and many of its leaders were arrested and charged with plotting to overthrow the government.

Unsuccessful Democratization: The President has important constitutional powers which overwhelm the parliament's power. Moreover, presidential elections are not competitive; the only candidates were respectively Sadat and Mubarak. According to the constitution, the People's assembly has large legislative and supervisory power (Part 5, section 3 of the 1971 constitution). Yet, it does not fully exercise its power because it is overwhelmingly controlled by the "party of the government," the National Democratic Party (NDP). The NDP won the majority of the seats at each parliamentary election: in 1979 under Sadat, and in 1984, 1987, 1990, 1995 and 2000 under Mubarak. Moreover, legislative elections are characterized by widespread electoral irregularities.

Jordan

Fluctuation between Limited Liberalization and Deliberalization: In November 1989, the first parliamentary elections since 1967 were organized (the Assembly or *Majlis al-Umma* consists of the Senate, whose members are appointed by the monarch, and the House of Representatives, whose members are elected by popular vote). They were reported as reasonably free and fair, with 647 candidates competing for 80 seats. Although political parties are illegal, informal political groupings exist and their candidates run formally as

independent. In 1991, the main political forces of the country approved a national charter. This charter emphasized the commitment of the parties to “political pluralism” and democracy. From 1992 to the present, political liberalization has known great advances as well as limits. The most important advances are the rescinding of martial law, the political party law legalizing the formation of parties, and a new press legislation that marked the end of censorship. Political liberalization was limited when the government in 1997 issued modifications to the Press Law. By installing financial requirements on the newspapers, this new law resulted in the closure of 12 independent weeklies. Unsuccessful Democratization: Four reasonably free and fair elections were organized in 1989, 1993, 1997, and 2001, albeit after modification of the election law by the government in 1993. However, it should be noted that these parliamentary elections cannot be considered advances in democratization because the powers of the parliament are very limited. All power is concentrated in the hands of the king. He nominates and revokes the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. Moreover, the powers of the king are hereditary (King Abdullah succeeded King Hussein in February 1999).

Kuwait

Fluctuation between Limited Liberalization and Deliberation: In August 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait. Emir Jabir al-Ahmad al Jabir and the Prime Minister Saad al-Abdallah al-Salim al-Sabah, as well as the ruling family, found refuge in Saudi Arabia where they organized a government in exile. In October 1990, the Emir and a broad representation of Kuwait's opposition met in Saudi Arabia and reached the following agreement: after the return of sovereignty in Kuwait, the Emir would restore the constitution and call for elections. However, once the Iraqis were ousted from Kuwait and the monarchy restored, the Emir instituted a martial law. Serious violations of human rights were recorded, including lynching and show trials of suspected collaborators of the Iraqis.

In June 1992, the government announced the end of martial law and parliamentary elections for October. The elections were effectively held. Although political parties were not permitted, informal political groupings participated in the elections as de facto parties with their candidates running formally as independents. They took 35 out of 50 seats of the national Assembly or *Majliss al-Umma*.

Unsuccessful Democratization: In October 1996, and July 1999 parliamentary elections were held again. However, it is important to notice that the political opening in Kuwait is the most limited found in the Arab countries. The power of the parliament is very limited and most of the power is in the hands of the Emir and his Prime Minister. Moreover, of a population of 2,238,000, only 772,000 are Kuwaiti citizens, 57% of whom are under the voting age of 21. Kuwaiti women are not permitted to vote or to be candidate. It should be noted, however, that in May 1999 the Emir granted women the right to vote and run for parliament; this ruling should apply for the next elections in 2003.

Lebanon

Fluctuation between Limited Liberalization and Deliberalization: While great advances have been made in the domain of political liberalization, there exist some important limits partly linked to domestic security issues. In Lebanon, freedom of press, freedom of association, freedom to form trade unions, and the right to strike are tolerated. Nevertheless, from 1992 up to the present, the priority given by the Lebanese government to security issues has resulted in the limitation of further civil liberties. For instance, a strike called by the General Confederation of Labor (GCL) and professional associations was forbidden in April 1994. Moreover, the Lebanese government uses diverse tactics to limit the consequences of the exercise of civil liberties. The government's authorization of new federations in order to limit the power of the GCL in April 1997 is a case in point.

Unsuccessful Democratization: In 1989, Lebanese members of Parliament signed a National Accord in Ta'if, Saudi Arabia. This accord stated the adoption of the amended democratic constitution of 1926. Amendments mainly concerned the confessional balance between Christian Maronites and Sunni Muslims: political power was put in the hands of the collective leadership of the cabinet (the President is a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister is a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of the legislature is a Shi'a Muslim).

Parliamentary elections were held in late summer 1992 to renew Lebanon's unicameral National Assembly (Majliss al Nuwab). Christian leaders boycotted the elections because of Syria's influence and presence in Lebanese territory. Many types of fraud were reported and the turnout was very low. In 1996, legislative elections were held again with the participation of the whole opposition. However, the government modified the electoral law in order to block any chance for the Christian opposition to win a majority in Mount Lebanon. Although the Constitutional Council declared the law anticonstitutional, the parliament adopted it. Elections thus took place and again widespread electoral fraud was registered. The Constitutional Council unseated four deputies for irregularities during the elections. Parliamentary elections were held again in August and September 2000. These elections occurred after the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon. Again, all major parties took part in these elections and widespread fraud occurred.

The Syrian tutelage: In 1989, after the signing of the National Accord, a *Communiqué* issued in Jidda, Saudi Arabia, dealt with the question of Syrian influence in Lebanon. Syria agreed to put an end to its army's security mission in Lebanon. However, it only agreed on the withdrawal of Syrian troops from western parts of Lebanon within two years and left the question of complete withdrawal for a future agreement to be negotiated by the two governments. Before the parliamentary elections of 1992, great advances were made toward reestablishing state authority: the Lebanese army was reconstituted with the strong support of Syria, the capital Beirut was unified, the militias were

disarmed with the exception of Amal (a Shi'ite party) and hizballah (Party of God, which is Shi'ite as well) in South Lebanon until the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Southern Lebanon in May 2000.

In May 1991, Lebanon signed with Syria the *Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination between Syria and Lebanon*. It set up a system of joint councils and a Supreme Council to elaborate and implement domestic and foreign policy coordination between the two countries. However, experts analyzed the treaty as an institutionalization of Syrian tutelage over Lebanon given the preponderance of Syria. Finally, since 1992, Syrian tutelage over Lebanese government and administration has been well illustrated by the frequent trips to Damascus by the Lebanese Prime Minister, the President, and government officials to take “advice” on domestic as well as foreign policy issues.

Morocco

Fluctuation between Limited Liberalization and Deliberalization: A formal multiparty political system has existed in Morocco since 1956 as well as a variety of media organizations, trade unions, and associations. However, after 1963 the opposition was the target of harsh repression by the regime. It was only after the so-called Green March in 1975 (thousands of unarmed Moroccans marched into the Western Sahara's territory) and the following consensus reached between part of the opposition and the monarchy on this issue that timid liberalizing reforms were launched. Today there are nearly 30 legal political parties in Morocco. However, Islamist parties are still illegal, except from the PJD (Party for Justice and Development) and although there are more than 70 Islamist associations in the country (Bendourou 1996). Moreover, although the radio and the television channels are controlled by the regime, Morocco has independent (from the regime) newspapers. Since 1975/76, the press has criticized the government although it cannot criticize the king or his decisions directly. Indeed, according to article 23 and 28 of the constitution it is a crime to criticize the king. However, freedom of the press was questioned when the government closed three newspapers *Le Journal*, *Assahifa*, and *Demain* in December 2000. Finally, the number of non-political associations has increased during the 1980s.

Moreover, the monarchy has undertaken several measures regarding the issue of political prisoners. In July 1994, the king decreed an amnesty for political prisoners. At his enthronization after the death of his father, king Mohamed VI took several decisions: the return of the opponent Abraham Serfaty as well as the family of the opponent Mehdi Ben Barka from exile, the relaxation of control of the Islamic leader Abdeslam Yassine (he has been under house arrest for ten years), and the authorization of pilgrimage to the former secret penitentiary of Tazmamart.

Unsuccessful Democratization: In 1975, the king succeeded in rallying national support from the population as well as from part of the opposition on the issue

of the Western Sahara territory. This was followed in 1977 by the organization of legislative elections, in which the legal opposition participated. The amendments of the constitution in 1992 and 1996 did not bring more democratic rules of the game, especially regarding the issue of the division of power. Indeed, the monarch still concentrates power in his hands. The parliament's powers are very limited: the king has the power to dissolve the parliament, members of parliament can lose their immunity if they criticize the king (article 39), the king can legislate, the sovereign's decisions are not susceptible to review. Moreover, powers of the king are hereditary (King Mohamed VI succeeded King Hassen II in July 1999).

In June and September 1993, legislative elections were organized. The first phase of the elections in June were marked by the victory of opposition parties (organized in a coalition bloc, the Democratic Bloc) which won 91 out of the 222 seats contested, on the one hand, and the decline of pro-government parties, on the other. However, the second phase in September was marked by a reversal with a victory of the monarchist parties, which won 66 out of 111 seats, whereas the opposition bloc won 17 seats. After the victory of the coalition of the opposition *Koutla* in the legislative elections of 1997, a compromise was negotiated with King Hassen II, who nominated Abderrahmane Youssoufi as Prime Minister in February 1998, while nominating leaders of his choice to the ministries of Justice, Interior, Foreign Affairs, Religious Affairs, and Defense. This episode was officially described as “a democratic alternance to power,” although the king still concentrates all the power in his hands.

Table 2. Patterns of liberalization and democratization in the Arab world

Liberalization and Backlash	Algeria (1989-1992) – Sudan – Tunisia - Yemen
Fluctuation between Limited Liberalization and Deliberalization	Algeria (1995 up to now) – Egypt – Jordan – Kuwait – Lebanon - Morocco

Sources: Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble (Brynen and al. 1998a), Nazih Ayubi (Ayubi 1995: 415-446), Goldblatt David, Kiloh Margaret, Lewis Paul, and Potter David (Goldblatt and al. 1997: 321-366), CIA factbook (<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook>), and International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES).

In sum, although in all the nine cases political change has not led to successful democratization, important variations along the line of liberalization characterize these political regimes. Two different patterns of change could be identified. As Table 2 summarizes, in some countries liberalization has led to a

backlash, while in others liberalization has fluctuated between limited liberalization and deliberalization. One of the countries considered has even followed different paths at different points in time: Algeria followed the path of liberalization and to some extent of democratization followed by a backlash before taking the path of selective and limited liberalization in 1995. The diversity of political trends in the Arab world is well captured in terms of the key concepts used in regime literature. This exercise, thus, has helped to place the Arab world in the broader comparative context offered by the regime change literature. A question which remains to be addressed, however, is whether this literature provides an adequate explanation of these different trajectories. This is an issue I turn to in the next section.

II. Attempts to Explain Variations in Political Liberalization

This section looks for an interpretation of the variations in political liberalization in the Arab World in the general literature on transition as well as in the literature focusing on politics in the Arab world. First, I show how the transition literature conceives of political liberalization as an unstable phase leading to three possible outcomes: either to democracy, to another authoritarian regime or to a revolutionary outcome. Second, I show how scholars analyzing the Middle East have failed to question the limits of the transition paradigm and conceived the Middle Eastern cases as anomalies characterized by a blocked or a particularly slow path of transition away from authoritarian rule.

1. The transition literature and the selection bias

This section focuses on scholars that analytically differentiate political liberalization and democratization.⁶

The unstable character of the political liberalization process is a widely accepted idea in the transition literature (Dahl 1971, 1973, O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, Di Palma 1990, Przeworski 1991). Tocqueville foresaw that “the most dangerous moment for a bad government is usually when it starts to

⁶ Historically, political liberalization and democratization were distinct (Gould 1999). Only in recent period, in the so-called third wave of democratization (Huntington 1991) have these processes seemed like part of the same process, namely the process of transition. It follows that political liberalization is not included in the analytical framework of all the studies of transition. The object of study or dependent variable of many studies is the specific process of democratization, that is, the mechanisms of introduction of a democratic regime (Huntington 1991; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Linz and Stepan 1996; Collier 1999). In theory, these types of study are not interested in political liberalization that occurs without democratization. However, in cases where political liberalization precedes democratization, these scholars teleologically include the liberalization phase in their study without looking at the dynamics linking liberalization and democratization processes.

reform itself” (Tocqueville 1866:259).⁷ The liberalization process is described as follows. When there is a division in the authoritarian regime between soft-liners and hard-liners and when soft-liners get the upper hand in the regime, liberalizing reforms are launched. Typically soft-liners launch these reforms believing that they will succeed in controlling the liberalization process and in broadening the social base of the regime without changing its structure. Yet, liberalizing reforms open up the space for society to organize and ask for further liberalization (Dahl 1973: 18, O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 10, Przeworski 1991: 61). Authors consider that society organizes because liberalizing reforms opens in the mind of the actors the very possibility of change (Tocqueville 1866:277). Indeed, actors in the society in general and in the opposition in particular raise their expectations beyond the limited reforms proposed by soft-liners incumbents (Tocqueville 1866: 243-245, Di Palma 1990: 82). It follows that the opposition uses all the spaces and opportunities available to push for more liberalization.

In this endeavor, it finds in soft-liners potential, and usually informal, allies in the regime. Indeed, these supporters of liberalization in the regime raise the cost of the annulment of liberalization by the hard-liners because of the following logic. Before deciding to organize a coup, the hard-liners will evaluate its costs in order to assess the probability of failure. The first cost implied by such a coup is the systematic repression of organized opposition groups. This cost could be afforded if and only if there is a high cohesion in the regime and more importantly in the armed forces. And the very existence of soft-liners in the regime supporting the liberalization process denies such cohesion and thus raises the costs of organizing a coup. Therefore, it is because the soft-liners raise the cost of repression of the opposition that their existence and role are central for the dynamic of liberalization in an authoritarian regime. In the words of Dahl, It could be said that by raising the cost of suppression of the opposition the soft-liners raise the chances for democratization (Dahl 1971: 15). The interaction between soft-liners and the democratic opposition create dynamics that pave the way for the conclusion of a political pact and the organization of founding elections. This dynamic is at the core of the instability of liberalization for it impedes authoritarian incumbents to realize their initial goal: broadening the base of the regime and installing a liberalized authoritarian regime (Dahl 1973: 18, O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 10). The common understanding of the process of political liberalization as inherently unstable leads to another consensus in the transition literature on the possible outcomes of such a process. Three possible outcomes are identified: a backlash to another authoritarian regime, a revolutionary outcome, or democratization (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 8, Przeworski 1991: 61).

⁷ This is my translation, the original French sentence is: “le moment le plus dangereux pour un mauvais gouvernement est d'ordinaire celui où il commence à se réformer” (Tocqueville 1866:259).

One pattern of liberalization identified in the Arab world seems to confirm the explanatory power of such a framework. Indeed, we have observed a liberalization process followed by a backlash to another authoritarian regime in Algeria (1989-1992), Tunisia, Sudan, and Yemen. However, the second pattern of liberalization characterized by a fluctuation of limited liberalization and deliberalization not followed by democratization is considered logically impossible by this literature. The very conception of the liberalization process as an unstable state of affairs rules out the possibility of such an outcome. Why does this pattern stand out as an anomaly?

I believe that this conception is due to the fact that scholars interested in the study of transition were primarily interested in identifying the conditions or the dynamics that lead to democracy. The challenge for this literature was to identify the *link* between liberalization and democratization. This explains why attention was focused on *successful* cases of Latin America and Southern Europe, i.e. cases where liberalization effectively led to democratization, on the one hand, and why cases of *failed* transition were neglected, on the other.⁸

This original bias both in the research question and in the selection of cases is at the origin of two implicit assumptions found in the transition literature. First, transition processes have been problematized assuming the existence of a potentially strong civil society. Cases analyzed in Latin America and Southern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s were, indeed, cases of *redemocratization* (Collier 1999: 13). That is to say that civil society in general and the political opposition in particular have had the opportunity in the past to organize, mobilize, and articulate demands. Consequently, when soft-liners in the regime launched liberalizing reforms, the opposition could *reorganize* drawing its strength from past experiences and organizational capital. Second, the timing of liberalization processes analyzed in previous studies coincided with a large consensus in the civil society about the liberal democratic project. In Latin America and Southern Europe, the weakness of the radical communists, explained both by the harsh repression directed towards the leftist elements in the society during the previous authoritarian government, and by the discrediting of the communist alternative, has left the liberal democratic opposition in the front line of mobilization.

In sum, the *strong* and *democratic* characters of the opposition are two underlying assumptions behind the description of liberalization processes in the transition literature. It is, therefore, not surprising that this process was described as inherently unstable due to the agitation caused by a strong civil society.

⁸ I reject the argument according to which there were only successful cases of Latin America and Southern Europe and no cases of failed transition to observe in the 1980s, on the ground that liberalization occurred in the Arab world as early as the 1970s. This argument is valid as far as democratization processes are concerned, but does not hold for processes of political liberalization.

Moreover, this literature has conceptualized the link between liberalization and successful democratization assuming ideal conditions, as it were, of a strong and democratic civil as well as political society on the one hand, and the soft-liners getting the upper hand in the regime, on the other. Given these ideal conditions, soft-liners of both camps have great probability to agree on a pact presented as the key to enter the club of democracies. In other words, the very assumption that a relatively strong civil society will mobilize and oppose the authoritarian regime following the liberalizing reforms launched by soft-liners rules out the possibility of a liberalization limited to some civil rights that are guaranteed to a selected part of the civil society. In a nutshell, implicit assumptions in this literature limit the range of possible outcomes. As a result, when transposed to unsuccessful cases, such as those found in the Arab world, it fails to give an account of a specific path of liberalization process, namely a fluctuation of limited liberalization and deliberalization. To understand this outcome, I thus turn to a literature that does not suffer from such a selection bias in favor of successful cases, namely the literature on political change in the Arab world.

2. The literature on the Arab world and the transitional fallacy

Against the background of the so-called third wave of democratization affecting all regions of the world (Huntington 1991), the lack of democratization in the Arab world appears as an exception. Some scholars have tried to explain this by broad cultural hypotheses stating that something about the Arabic or Muslim nature of these societies makes them in one way or another different from other societies in general and western societies in particular (Huntington 1991). These cultural hypotheses derive from the implicit assumptions found under the heading “Arab world.” Geographically speaking, the Middle East region also includes Turkey, Iran, and Israel. By specifying “Arab” Middle East or “Arab” world, we already select, without any theoretical justification, a specific set of countries on the religious and ethnic variables, i.e. Muslim and Arab. This issue is not specific to scholars studying the Arab world and is found also in regional studies of Latin America and Eastern Europe. A more explicit and theoretically driven selection in regional studies is thus needed (Bunce 2000a).

Other scholars have tried to explain the lack of democratization by arguing that there exist some forms of political opening in many Arab Muslim countries which still need to be addressed (Salamé 1995, Brynen et al. 1995, 1998a; Baaklini et al. 1999). Indeed, using the conceptual framework elaborated by the transition literature, scholars have highlighted the fact that if democracy has not yet been achieved in these countries it does not mean that there is no opening and no transition (Korany and Noble 1998: 4). In cases where political liberalization has occurred, the challenge is to explain why the transition has gone no further, that is, why democratization has not occurred.

Many scholars have thus tried to find the factors impeding democratization. Some authors have attempted to explain how the lack of a cultural pact could be a precondition for a political pact as defined by O'Donnell and Schmitter (Leca 1995). Others have explored how a whole set of possible factors – political culture, political economy, civil society, and the international context - could impede democratization in the region (Waterbury 1995; Brynen et al. 1995). Many authors have convincingly invoked the Rentier nature of the state to explain why some Arab countries have known a political opening, failing, however, to answer the question of why this process did not lead to democratization (Luciani 1987, 1988, 1995a, 1995b; Brynen 1992; Brand 1992; Satloff 1992). And last but not least, a group of scholars have tried to find an answer by exploring the impact of formal democratic institutions, such as the parliament, in a process of slow and incremental democratization (Baaklini et al. 1999).

While these studies succeed in showing what factors Arab countries lacked to democratize, they fail to give an account of the different paths of liberalization in the Arab world and their respective dynamics. Moreover, they fail to address the main puzzle posed by some Arab cases to the transition literature, namely a fluctuation of limited liberalization and deliberalization. What could account for such a failure?

In my view, the origin of such a failure is to be found in the misuse of the transition literature. Scholars have made a methodological mistake by using the conceptualization of transition as a theory. The conceptualization of transition is indeed based on the *empirical observation* of Latin American and Southern European experiences. This is different from a *theory* of democratization or transition. In other words, it describes a *possible* route of democratization but does not identify clear criteria and conditions under which democratization is *predictable* or even *probable*. This is not to say that nothing is said about liberalization processes as typical signs of the beginning of a transition process. However, a “typical sign” is different to a clear criterion that allows assessing if a process has started. In short, the fact that this *empirical conceptualization* identifies political liberalization as the beginning of a transition does not mean that any form of political liberalization is unstable by definition or the beginning of a contingent transition process. Consequently, the fact that a certain form of unstable political liberalization was the typical sign of the beginning of a transition process in Latin American and Southern European cases does not imply that all forms of political liberalization are signs of transition processes. There is no theoretical ground behind the affirmation that any form of political opening announces that a process of transition away from authoritarian rule has started. This logically implies that the form of political opening observed in some countries of the Arab world is neither necessarily unstable nor a sign of transition processes.

It seems that scholars studying political change in the Arab world by interpreting the process of liberalization as being by definition part of a broader process of transition from authoritarian rule has fallen into the *transitional fallacy*. This fallacy explains why they have interpreted political liberalization in the Arab world as a blocked or slow process of transition away from authoritarian rule. They thus look for the possible factors impeding these transition processes from evolving into democratization instead of giving an account of the path of liberalization that remains unexplained by the transition literature, namely a path characterized by mixed dynamics of liberalization and deliberalization. The challenge is to explain this anomalous outcome and it is to such a challenge that I turn in the next section.

III. Political Liberalization Dynamics Reversed

I contend that, under certain conditions, liberalization processes can be controlled by the incumbents and limited to certain groups. That is to say that under certain conditions, authoritarian incumbents succeed in broadening the base of the authoritarian regime without being overwhelmed by the unstable dynamics of liberalization observed in the transition literature. In order to show how such scenario is possible, I first identify the conditions under which a collusion of part of the moderate opposition and the hard-liners in the regime is possible and lead to a reversal of the liberalization dynamics into dynamics that sustain the authoritarian regime rather than undermining it. Then I argue that such pattern of liberalization pleads for an epistemological shift from the study of transition to the study of regime transformations.

1. The unnatural collusion of the moderate opposition with hard-liners

It is well known that liberalizers open the regime in order to broaden the social base of the regime by including some independent groups in the authoritarian institutions. This outcome implies that some independent groups in the society, while having their freedom of organization guaranteed, will agree to defend a limited set of interests and to criticize some policies of the regime without challenging the power of the authoritarian ruler or ruling group. As to the rest of the groups, they are excluded from the authoritarian game and repressed. In other words, liberalization is limited to some groups and some issues tolerated by the regime. However, according to the transition literature, this state of affairs could not be sustained. Indeed, the main insight of this literature has been to highlight the fact that as soon as the soft-liners guarantee some civil liberties, groups and individuals will make use of these liberties to ask for further liberalization to soft-liners. The puzzle is to understand why and how part of the opposition could be included in the authoritarian institutions without leading to the dynamic, well described by the transition literature, which consists of pushing soft-liners in the regime to concede more and more liberalization. Under what conditions will the inclusion of some groups and

individuals, the civil liberties of which are guaranteed, not lead to further liberalization and ultimately to a political pact and a democratization process?

In my attempt to solve this puzzle, and although I have included Lebanon and Kuwait in the set of anomalous cases, I do not use these two cases to generate or test hypotheses. As already mentioned the case of Lebanon is problematic because of the intervening variable of the Syrian tutelage and the subsequent difficulty to isolate strictly domestic dynamics from external influences. Regarding the case of Kuwait, the very limited character of its political liberalization process makes it difficult to argue that there has been a significant change within the regime, let alone a change of regime. I will thus rely on the cases of Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco.

To begin solving this puzzle, it is worth recalling the conditions under which Latin American and Southern European political liberalization occurred. It has been said above that the opposition was strong and democratic at the moment of the opening by soft-liners in the regime.⁹ I formulate the hypothesis that, in the cases of fluctuation between limited liberalization and deliberalization, the moderate opposition was weaker than the radicals were when liberalization occurred. Moreover, I contend that this specific condition has made possible a collusion between the moderate opposition and the hard-liners in the regime leading to dynamics of limited liberalization and eventually deliberalization.

Defining the actors:

The transition literature helps us identify actors involved in a liberalization process. In this literature, actors are defined in strategic rather than economic or cultural terms. That is to say that emphasis is put on the strategic option chosen by a group rather than on its ideological commitment or its belonging to a certain socio-economic class. Four main actors could be identified. In the regime, authoritarian incumbents are divided between soft-liners and hard-liners. The hard-liners are “those who, contrary to the consensus of this period of world history, believe that the perpetuation of authoritarian rule is possible *and* desirable, if not by rejecting outright all democratic forms, then by erecting some facade behind which they can maintain inviolate the hierarchical and authoritarian nature of their power” (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 16). As to the soft-liners they believe that the regime will have to make use of some degree of legitimation. While they could be indistinguishable from the hard-liners in the first place, they turn into soft-liners because of “their increasing awareness that the regime they helped to implant, and in which they usually occupy important positions, will have to make use, in the foreseeable future, of some degree or some form of electoral legitimation ... [and that] the regime cannot wait too

⁹ Soft-liners in the regime are assumed to be stronger than the hard-liners by definition because the very fact that they are able to launch liberalizing reforms assumes that they have the upper hand in the regime.

long before reintroducing certain freedoms, at least to the extent acceptable to moderate segments of the domestic opposition and of international public opinion” (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 16). It is important to stress the fact that soft-liners are not necessarily committed to democracy, the key difference between them and the hard liners being that they perceive their political survival in the broadening of the social base of the authoritarian system.

The opposition is also divided between two sets of actors. On the one hand, the radicals are groups that seek not only to overthrow the regime, but also to seize control of the state; they are revolutionary in the sense that they seek to radically transform the state and society and they are non-democratic in the sense that they reject the democratic principle of alternance in power. On the other hand, the moderate groups formally support the democratic rules of the game; this does not necessarily mean neither that they are loyal to democratic principles nor that they share the same definition of a democracy.¹⁰

Measuring the actors’ strength:

The strength of each actor could be measured according to their capacity to mobilize resources. In the regime, the most important resources are the state repressive apparatus such as the police and the armed forces. Another important resource to enhance the strength of either the soft-liners or the hard-liners, especially during elections, is found in the control of the state bureaucracy.

One of the main bargaining powers of an opposition group is its capacity to mobilize people in order to organize protest and defend a set of interests. People mobilization could be either quantitative, i.e. mass mobilization, or qualitative, i.e. mobilization of an economically powerful sector in the society such as the bourgeoisie.

The collusion of the moderate opposition with the hard-liners

Liberalization involves a continuous positioning and bargaining among the four above-mentioned political groups and actors of various strength. During the process of liberalization the strength of the radicals, in quantitative as well as qualitative terms, could make the outcome of an eventual transition uncertain and even dangerous to the moderates. If radicals, who reject the democratic rules of the game and alternance in power, succeed in controlling the state without the help of the moderates, they are likely to install a hegemonic regime and seek to change the society. The moderates fearing to be repressed in such a case, are likely to sustain the hard-liners in their repression of both the soft-liners in the regime and the radical opposition. In other words, a moderate opposition group too weak to balance the power of the radical opposition that hangs like a sword of Damocles over the liberalization process, is likely to agree to stop pushing for

¹⁰ It is erroneous to think that Islamist movements are necessarily and by definition part of the radical pole. Indeed, many Islamist movements and parties throughout the Arab world have adopted a moderate position.

more liberalization in exchange of the exclusion from the legal rules of the game, and eventually the repression, of the radicals. Through this arrangement, they may also hope that legal and guaranteed political activity will reinforce its power in order to be able to oppose both the regime and the radicals in the future.

Under these conditions, hard-liner incumbents include some weak moderate opposition groups while excluding and repressing strong radical groups that jeopardize the regime. It is in this sense that I contend that hard-liners and part of the weak opposition groups accept to act in formal or informal collusion, each side agreeing on new authoritarian rules of the game. It is a situation in which the hard-liners' and moderates' interests meet against the strong radical opposition. That is not to say that this collusion is an alliance between equals. The power of hard-liners in the regime, who control the state repressive apparatus as well as the bureaucracy, does not depend solely on the moderate opposition. This could explain the movement of deliberalization observed when one of a previously tolerated group is outlawed or repressed.

This scenario has been referred to in the Arab world as "the Islamist threat" scenario. In the countries where radical Islamist groups were strong, such as Algeria, Egypt, and Morocco, it has been argued that after liberalizing reforms started, many non-Islamist organizations feared that radical Islamists would take advantage of an eventual democratization process to install an Islamic state in which they would be repressed. This interpretation is contradicted by the fact that not only some moderate Islamist groups acted in collusion with hard-liner incumbents in these countries, but also some non-Islamist groups refused and opposed the hard-line stance on the regime.

The case of Algeria is exceptional in that it is the sole regime of the Arab world that has accepted to legalize and tolerate the activities of a radical Islamist group, the FIS. There is a debate about the radical stance of the FIS. Some argue that it was a moderate party on the basis of its participation in the elections in 1990 and 1991. Yet, there is no doubt about an important revolutionary stream in this party along a more moderate one (Labat 1995). Because of this double stream within the party, it was not clear if it would have installed an Islamic state after their victory at the legislative elections at the end of 1991. After the liberalizing reforms launched in 1989, the moderate opposition, whether Islamists (Hamas, Ennahda, and El Islah since 1999), leftists (the PAGS which became Ettahadi in 1993 and MDS in 1998), or democrats (RCD), feared the qualitative as well as quantitative strength of the FIS. They thus decided to collude with the regime and supported the political coup organized by hard-liners in the army in January 1992. This coup was followed by the exclusion of the soft-liners in the regime, such as the president Chadli and the group of reformers in the former one party FLN, and the harsh repression of the FIS and several Islamists groups that have launched an insurrection against the state, such as the Salvation Islamic Army (AIS), and the Islamic Armed Groups

(GIA). Since 1995, three weak Islamist parties Hamas, Ennahda, and El-Islah (only since 1999) accepted to both participate in the elections organized by the incumbents between 1995 and 1999 and to be co-opted in state institutions.

In Egypt, liberalizing reforms were launched under president Anouar Al-Sadat in the late 1970s. This period has allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to reorganize after the harsh repression endured under the previous presidency of Gamal Abd-el-Nasser. However, after the assassination of Sadat in October 1981, it could be said that the hard-liners took the upper hand in the regime. Indeed, it is under the presidency of Husni Mubarak that political liberalization has fluctuated between deliberalization and limited liberalization. Legalized opposition political parties that regularly participate in legislative elections (1984, 1987, 1990, 1995, and 2000) tacitly sustain his presidency. The religious-based parties being forbidden, the Muslim Brothers as well as other Islamist groups are formally excluded from this political game. Yet, the moderate stance of the Muslim Brothers explains why their participation to legislative elections was tolerated in the 1980s. They participated in legislative elections in coalition with legal parties: with the Neo-Wafd in 1984 and with the Socialist Party of Labor and the Liberal Party in 1987. Other Egyptian Islamist groups, such as al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya and Jihad, are revolutionary and organized several armed attacks in the 1990s. The Egyptian government harshly repressed them, before extending the repression to the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood, leading to a deliberalization of the regime.

In the case of Morocco, political parties are tolerated and included in a controlled political game. Although, one weak moderate Islamist party, the PJD (Party for Justice and Development), has been legalized in 1997, the two most important Islamist groups, Al-'Adl wal-Ihsane (Justice and Charity) of Sheikh Abdesalam Yassine, and the official (though not officially a political party) al-'Adl wa-Tanmiya (Justice and Reform), cannot organize as political parties. While these groups do not put into question the legitimacy of the king, it is difficult to know what their strategy will be if they become part of a liberalization process. Their potential radical stance and strength hang like a sword over further political liberalization in Morocco. This explains why moderate political parties collude with the hard-line adopted by the king towards Islamist groups.

The case of Jordan is exceptional for it is not the strength of the radical that explains the fluctuation between limited liberalization and deliberalization, but rather the weakness of the moderate opposition vis-à-vis the regime. The Muslim Brotherhood was the only association tolerated since the 1950s. They supported the regime before the liberalizing reforms. When new parliamentary elections were called by king Hussein to be held on November 8, 1989, political parties were still illegal and candidates had to run as individuals. However, the Muslim Brotherhood, organized as a charitable society since the 1950s, was able to develop an electoral base of support for its candidates. Consequently,

Islamists emerged as one of the main political forces in Jordan by obtaining thirty-two seats out of eighty. In 1992, following the legalization of political parties and in view of the next legislative elections to be held in November 8, 1993, some leading Muslim Brothers created the AIF party along territorial lines in order to structure and aggregate Islamist preferences. However, fearing an overwhelming Islamist victory, the king adopted a new electoral law in 1993 aimed at undercutting the Muslim Brothers. The articles number 46.B and number 52 of the 1986 electoral law number 22, were changed in order to introduce the so-called “one person, one vote” ballot, which in essence compelled voters to choose between tribal and party loyalties (Charillon & Mouftard, 1994, pp. 45-46). The tribal ties won over partisan structures and the AIF won only sixteen seats while candidates with no party affiliation won 46 seats.

Yet, the following questions could be raised against the plausibility of such scenari. What makes limited liberalization in an authoritarian regime sustainable? Why do moderate opposition groups that are in collusion with the hard-liners not take advantage of their legalized and protected status to enhance their power and push for more liberalization?

The answer is to be found in both the fear of the radicals and the incapacity to organize mass mobilization. First, fearing the radicals, the moderates are likely to push for the restriction of political and civil liberties. Consequently, civil liberties, while improving, are likely to be limited to these groups and certain issues. Second, their incapacity to organize mass mobilization lies in the ambiguity of what Linz has labeled the *semiopposition* (Linz 1973a). The paradox of the situation of political groups tolerated by the regime lies in the fact that their very cooperation with the regime discredits their opposition stance impeding, in this way, their capacity to mobilize people. This phenomenon can be observed through the low enrollment in legal political parties and organizations, in the low turnout of the elections organized by the regime, as well as in the few inscriptions of citizens in the electoral lists. In other words, having agreed to act in collusion with the hard-liners and to sustain the authoritarian regime, they can hardly present themselves as a credible alternative to this regime. Yet, these groups are attractive for educated sectors of the society for they offer an opportunity to enter state institutions.

The main difference between the limited liberalization and the co-optation as conceptualized by Linz rests on the status of the semiopposition. In Linz’s classical conceptualization, only charismatic leaders of the opposition, who do not depend on a constituency, are co-opted and participate to the government. In the peculiar situation of a limited liberalization, the constitution of political organizations is tolerated and the whole group is co-opted. This difference is crucial in that it is the inclusion of opposition *groups*, rather than *individuals*, in the authoritarian institutions that explains the reversal of the liberalization

dynamics from undermining into sustaining dynamics. The mechanism of co-optation allows the regime to be more *responsive* when needed by co-opting one of those groups on the one hand, and to *share the responsibilities* with these groups for unpopular policies on the other. As to groups rejecting the legal political game set by hard-liners, they are either excluded or repressed. The semiopposition thus paradoxically plays the role of “support of the state” (Zartman 1990: 220-246). In sum, by making the authoritarian regime more flexible, the collusion of the moderate opposition with hard-liners in the regime leads to the reversal of the dynamics of liberalization as conceptualized in the transition literature into dynamics allowing the authoritarian regime to survive.

2. The epistemological shift from transition to transformation

The reversal of political liberalization from undermining into sustaining dynamics shows that liberalizing reforms are not necessarily tantamount to a progress towards a more liberal type of regime. Contrariwise, I contend that in some Arab cases the guarantee of civil liberties limited to some groups has led to the survival of authoritarian regimes. That is to say that to the quantitative augmentation of liberal rights does not always correspond a qualitative progress towards a more liberal type of regime, let alone a more democratic one. In short, in and by themselves, liberal reforms could not be systematically equated with qualitative and genuine liberalization of the regime.

This puts in question the very idea, developed in the transition literature (Dahl 1971, O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, Di Palma 1990, Przeworski 1991), of a continuum of liberalization admitting of gradations. Indeed, it is the equation of liberal rights conceived of in quantitative terms, i.e. how many civil liberties guaranteed to how many people, with liberal rights interpreted in qualitative terms, that is according to their impact on the nature of the regime, that precludes the very possibility of liberalization dynamics such as found in Arab cases.

In avoiding this shortcoming, a fruitful strategy to follow would be to learn from the work of scholars who have studied transition in Central and Eastern Europe. Stark argues that what the transposition of the set of concepts of transitology in Central and Eastern Europe reveals is the necessity to operate an epistemological shift from explaining the study of the process of liberal and democratic reforms *according* to its end result, to the study of what is happening during the process *independently* of its end result (Stark 1992). In the former approach, explaining the process of liberalizing and democratizing a political regime is tantamount to explaining the causes or conditions of its end result, i.e. success or failure in implementing a minimal bunch of civil rights and democratic procedures, while in the latter approach, it is rather making the process of change itself intelligible. Only from such a vantage point, it is possible to leave the qualitative interpretation of the outcome of transformation open. As he argues himself, “we become circumspect about the notion of

“transition” itself – alert to the possibility that behind such a seemingly descriptive term are teleological concepts driven by hypothesized end states ... Thus in place of *transition* we analyze *transformations*, in which the introduction of new elements most typically combines with adaptations, rearrangements, permutations, and reconfigurations of existing organizational forms” (Stark 1992: 300). The main implications of this shift are twofold. First, a focus on regime transformation instead of transition implies that what is needed is an interpretation of the complexities of the process of change rather than its outcome. Therefore, the researcher abandons the very idea of qualifying regime changes as either liberalization or democratization, which are “concepts driven by hypothesized end states.” Second, it logically supposes the introduction of historical forces in the study of regime, because “in a theory of change based on an analysis of transformative practices, the new does not come from the new - or from nothing - but from reshaping existing resources ... thus, transformation will resemble innovative adaptations that combine seemingly discrepant elements – bricolage - more than architectural design” (Stark 1992: 301).

This epistemological shift has opened a whole agenda of research on regime change analysis focusing on “the metamorphosis of organizational forms and adaptations of social ties as causal factors explaining the outcome of political transformation in eastern and central Europe” (Stark 1996, Szelényi and Szelényi 1995). As a way of illustrating the fruitfulness and vitality of this research agenda and without pretending to be exhaustive, it could be said that scholars opting for the study of transformative practices have chosen between two main strategies. Some have drawn from the methodology elaborated by the literature on path dependence and critical junctures (Bruszt and Stark 1998, Bunce 1999, Collier and Collier 1991, Mahoney 2000, Pierson 2000, Thelen 1999). Other scholars have instead opted for the study of the implication of prior regime type as a way of accounting for the impact of historical forces on transition paths (Bunce 2000b, Linz and Stepan 1996). In my view, a similar research agenda should be opened on regime change in the Arab world.

IV. Conclusion

This paper places the Arab world in a broader comparative context. It shows how political trends in the Arab world follow two patterns of political liberalization: liberalization and backlash, and a fluctuation between limited liberalization and deliberalization. It then shows how the latter pattern of change raises questions about the explanatory frameworks that are currently used to understand regime change and which have been applied to the Arab world. Thereafter, it offers an interpretation of the weak moderate opposition relative to the radical one as a factor that reverses the liberalization dynamics as conceptualized in the transition literature. This weakness leads the moderate opposition to collude with the hard-liners in the regime, sustaining in this way

the authoritarian regime rather than undermining it. Finally, it is argued that this interpretation questions the idea of a continuum of liberalization and pleads for making an epistemological shift from the study of transition to the study of regime transformations. A large research agenda on regime change in the Arab world is thus opened.

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