Islam, Democracy, Diversity: Some Reflections on the Arab Popular Uprisings

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Resumo

Islão, Democracia, Diversidade: Algumas Reflexões sobre os Levantamentos Populares Árabes

A chamada «Primavera Árabe» surgiu como uma enorme surpresa para a maioria dos observadores e académicos e, apesar dos seus resultados finais ainda serem desconhecidos, o «mundo árabe» não voltará a ser o mesmo. Estas revoltas populares árabes não foram previstas, mas eram realmente imprevisíveis?

Seja qual for a resposta, as mudanças que ocorreram na Tunísia, Egito, Líbia, para não falar no Bahrein, Marrocos ou na Síria, mostram claramente que os regimes autoritários não eram - como as democracias ocidentais que os apoiaram fizeram crer - a melhor e única alternativa ao islamismo. Além disso estas revoltas enfatizaram as profundas mudanças sociais que resultaram no surgimento de novos atores, principalmente mulheres e jovens que estiveram na linha da frente. Embora o islamismo tenha dizimado a ideia de uma exceção democrática árabe, a regulação democrática do pluralismo cultural parece ser um dos desafios mais cruciais ao futuro do «mundo árabe».

Abstract

The so called "Arab Spring" came as a huge surprise to most observers and scholars and, though its final outcomes are still unknown, things will never be the same again in the "Arab world". These Arab popular uprisings were not predicted but were they really unpredictable?

Whatever the answer may be, the changes that took place in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, not to talk of Bahrain, Morocco or Syria, clearly show that authoritarian regimes were not, as the Western democracies which long supported them believed, the best and only alternative to Islamism. Moreover, these uprisings underline the deep social changes resulting into the emergence of new actors, and mainly women and youth who were at the waterfront of these uprisings. Yet, though the latter have wiped out the idea of an Arab exception to democracy, the democratic regulation of cultural pluralism appears to be one of the most crucial challenges for the future of the "Arab world".

The dramatic changes that have been taking place in the Arab world since December 2010 and the self immolation by fire of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, question once again the role of Islam in these societies. These changes are taking place in Muslim societies but is Islam the explanatory variable for them or is it a dependent variable tied to social, economic, political or cultural variables? Though religion might play an important role in history, it cannot be the central paradigm for the study of Muslim societies, unless we consider that these societies are so implacably particular and specific that the classic tools of the social sciences would be inadequate to analyse and try to understand their development. This, as we know, was the position of a form of orientalism and of certain orientalists, Western or Arab, all of them were fiercely criticized by Edward Said (2003).

But even if we consider that Islam as a religion plays a major role in Muslim societies then it is necessary to keep in mind some methodological if not epistemological precautions.

First, for the assumption that there is an inherent incompatibility between Islam as a religion and modernity, it is useful to insist on the idea, Max Weber notwithstanding, that there is no religion that is naturally compatible or incompatible with modernity. If we consider the Protestant Reformation and counter-Reform movements in Europe there is no doubt that they have played a central role in the European Renaissance, while, as Tocqueville put it in the 19ᵗʰ Century, Puritanism and religious pluralism and freedom were at the heart of American democracy. But, at the same time, how to avoid analyses that explain that Nazism was possible in Germany partly because it's holistic nature encountered protestant communitarianism (Badie, 1984), a hypothesis that Karl Polanyi (1983), in his book *The Great Transformation*, refutes by explaining that, on the contrary, Nazism results from the decomposition of political liberalism which, according to him, historically followed the communitarian organization. The conclusion to draw is that, like any religion, Islam is a social and historical construct, as likely as such to cope with democracy or to inspire the worst theocratic regimes.

Second, and as a consequence, the discussion about the compatibility between Islam and democracy may be philosophically stimulating but it is of little interest with regard to a sociological approach to Muslim societies. We could discuss for hours the famous principle that Islam is religion and state (*al islam din wa dawla*) with reference to the totalizing dimension of the Islamic law (*sharia*), without understanding much about the reality of politics in Muslim societies. To put it differently, what we need is a sociology of actors.

Third, while getting at the core of social and not Muslim actors and strategies, it remains necessary to avoid being subjugated by any discourse or actor in particular. To get back to Arab popular uprisings, no one predicted them and most of the observers were even amazed by their occurrence. The vocation of the social

sciences is not to predict what is going to happen – in any case when social scientists do make predictions, they are most often proven wrong by reality – though, of course, their analyses may be useful to policy makers. But one of the reasons why the Arab uprisings were so surprising certainly lies in the exaggerated importance given by researchers, including myself, and policy makers to the "myth of authoritarian stability" (Gause, 2011) and to Islamism and Islamists. I don't mean that Islamism was invented by researchers or that policy makers' concern with Islamist terrorism and political stability is illegitimate. I mean that not enough attention was paid to non Islamist actors and strategies, to those who we may call "ordinary Muslims" (Otayek and Soares, 2007). Not enough attention was either drawn to secular, liberal or democratic forces in these regions, as if they did not exist. It is certainly time now for researchers and policy makers to reconsider their approach to Muslim societies.

Authoritarianism and Democracy in the Arab and Muslim World
The relation between Islam and democracy has fed endless political and scientific controversies. As a social scientist, I might accept the proposal that Islam is incompatible with democracy proposal as a legitimate hypothesis but not as a statement or as an unquestionable truth, in the same way I might accept an alternative hypothesis which would say that Islam *is* compatible with democracy. But the two hypotheses are only hypotheses and need to be argued and confronted with the history of Muslim and Arab societies, which many people including leading scientists fail to do, thus falling into the trap of culturalism.

This does not mean, of course, that there is not a dramatic lack of democracy in many Arab and Muslim countries. Democracy there is the exception while authoritarianism was and remains to a large extent the rule. But what is it about, Muslim exceptionalism or Arab exceptionalism to democracy (Robertson, 2004)? In other words, is Islam the problem or rather is it the resilience of Arab authoritarian regimes, at least until the current popular uprisings? Arab people amount to a little more than 330 million out of 1,3 billion Muslims around the world. And some of them live under electoral democracies and have been doing so for decades (Turkey, Indonesia, the largest Muslim country by its population in the world, Senegal) while others have more recently begun to experiment with democratic institutions. Mali, a country predominantly Muslim, was in this situation and could be considered as a relative success story until the *coup d'Etat* of March 21st. But even in this case, is Islam responsible for the failure of democracy or is it rather the incapacity of the Malian state and its international protectors to solve the recurring problems in the Northern part of the country and to elaborate adequate political and economic solutions to Tuareg claims while fighting against *Al Qaeda in Maghreb* (AQIM)?

Muslim exceptionalism or Arab exceptionalism, the crucial question is not the compatibility of Islam with democracy, but the exceptional resilience of Arab authoritarian regimes and their capacity to adapt themselves to the international environment that emerged after the end of the cold war and the universalization of the democratic norm. From this point of view, it is interesting to note that many authoritarian Arab regimes appropriated democratic symbols and semantics, and proclaimed their adhesion to democracy and the rule of law. In Egypt, the ruling party called itself the National Democratic Party and in Tunisia, it called itself the Constitutional Democratic Rally. In both countries, the reference to democracy and a controlled and limited political pluralism were part of the regimes' self legitimizing repertoire while they remained deeply authoritarian. The strategies that made such resilience possible have been well documented by political scientists but it may be useful to briefly get back to the thesis of voluntary servitude.

According to this explanation, the resilience of Arab authoritarian regimes lied and lies in their capacity to command obedience and social consent in exchange for security and access to some economic resources allowing consumption and a certain level of social welfare. Ben Ali's regime in Tunisia was the paradigmatic figure of what social scientists like B. Hibou (2006) and M. Camau and V. Geisser (2003) described as the "security pact" considered as the bedrock of Tunisian and more broadly Arab authoritarianism. This thesis is interesting for many reasons and mainly because it refutes essentialist and culturalist prejudices, and focuses on actors and strategies. But to what extent did the focus on obedience and the collusions between rulers and the ruled distract from seeing the resentment and frustrations lying beneath apparent obedience and consent? To obey is not to accept; to obey is not to consent. There is an Arab proverb that says nearly this: "The hand you cannot break, kiss it and pray for it to break". What was perceived as consent and resignation to tyrannical powers was often in fact dissimulation and a social trick. The Arab uprisings prove that Arabs are not by substance extraneous to values such as freedom, dignity, equality and democracy the West considers as part of its civilization.

Arab popular uprisings are often said to be democratic transitions. But to talk of democratic transitions today is certainly premature. The contestation we observe is democratic but democratic contestation does not necessarily lead to a democratic transition. Ben Ali, Mubarak and Qaddhafi have been overthrown but democratization is still to come. As has been often the case with Sub-Saharan democratic transitions, authoritarian restorations are possible for many reasons and mainly the absence of a strong political secular and democratic leadership, a fact that helps to explain in large part the rise of Islamists, *Annahda* in Tunisia, the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, as the dominant political force. The aim is not to downplay the popular uprisings whose political and psychological impact has probably been irreversible

in the sense that they have put an end to the culture of fear through which the authoritarian regimes had built their domination. It is rather to stress the idea that these ongoing uprisings are at the same time civic and political. They are political because they called for a change of regime and they are civic because they were initiated by the civil societies and reflect aspirations for social justice and citizenship rights. The concept of civil society is a very controversial one and I am not convinced that it is an operative concept from a scientific point of view. This is the reason why it is more relevant to think in terms of social movement and collective action. Nevertheless, it is arguable that the Arab uprisings have less to do with the Iranian revolution of 1979 than they have to do with the revolutions in Eastern and Central Europe after the end of the Soviet Union. The Arab world is of course not Eastern or Central Europe but in both cases, civil society played a major role at least in the beginning and in both cases the quest for political liberalism is intimately linked to social justice and the respect for human dignity. It would be of great help at this stage to recall that civic leaders in Eastern Europe like V. Havel and A. Michnik conceived the rise of civil society as a way to articulate political liberalism and renewed forms of social and economic solidarity (Baker, 1999). This vision, as we know, was quickly eclipsed by the triumph of market democracy and neo-liberalism. I don't know if political liberalism will take root in the Arab world or if, like in Sub-Saharan Africa, multiparty democracy will be the fig leaf of some kind of a neo-authoritarianism. But I am quiet sure that Islamism is absolutely compatible with economic and financial neo-liberalism.

Islamist Electoral Successes

The electoral outcomes of Arab uprisings reflect an amazing paradox: in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco even though the situation there is quiet different from Tunisia and Egypt, the Islamist parties have won elections and have been propelled into government. But is it truly surprising? The uprisings were unpredictable but is it the case with this Islamist wave? Certainly not given the fierce repression of democratic and secular forces by the authoritarian regimes. Moreover, while systematically crushing any demand for real democracy, the authoritarian powers cultivated a rather ambiguous attitude towards Islamists. On the one hand, they opposed them, limiting or merely tolerating their political activities, for example in Morocco, Egypt and Jordan, or trying to eradicate them physically as in Algeria and, to some extent, in Tunisia and Syria. But on the other hand, they also developed Islamic rhetoric as proof of their respect for Islamic precepts and their piety, thereby legitimizing claims for more Islam in the public sphere and also contributing to the diffusion of conservative ideas about and practices of Islam in society. In this sense, it might be useful to recall that many of these authoritarian regimes did, at one time or another, favour the Islamists in order to neutralize the pressure of leftist or

nationalist movements, as did late president Anouar al-Sadate in Egypt when he decided to launch his politics of economic liberalization known as *Infitah*, to get rid of the soviet advisers who had been present in Egypt for more than twenty years and to oppose the critics of the Nasserist forces.

In the recent years and with the possible exceptions of Algeria and Tunisia, the authoritarian regimes seemed to have reached a kind of a status quo or strategic agreement with the Islamists. The latter could be tolerated and incorporated to a certain degree into the electoral game but on the condition that they accept the true rules of the game, that is, the unchallenged monopoly of political power by the ruling elites. In exchange, the Islamists could invest in civil society, develop their social activities, impose their sartorial codes such as the *niqab* for women, etc. In short, for the ruling elites the monopoly of the political sphere; for Islamists the social one. This arrangement meant that the authoritarian state agreed to abandon some of its prerogatives and, moreover, its pretention to overall social control. But this self mutilation was functional in a global context of state disengagement and reorganization as a consequence of neo-liberal reforms. As a result, Islamist movements, everywhere in the Arab world and even in Sub-Saharan Muslim countries have invested in the social fields abandoned by the state such as health, housing, education; they have replaced the state in supplying services, especially among the poorest parts of the population, thus maintaining certain elements of social welfare. From this point of view, Islamist movements have proven to be entirely compatible with the so-called Washington consensus. Their commitment to economic liberalism expresses the emergence of a "market islam" (*islam de marché*) in the words of Patrick Haenni (2005).

With regard to the general weakness and lack of organization of the secular forces, the electoral rise of Islamist movements is not really surprising; to a certain extent, it is even logical. This rise also underscores another fact: the incapacity of Arab authoritarian regimes to contain Islamism. The firm anti-Islamist stance of these regimes was and still is sometimes at the core of their self legitimizing rhetoric, especially since September 11/ 2001. It is in the name of anti-Islamism that they could justify the lack of political freedom and negotiate for international supports from which they have benefited. The Islamist electoral successes have proven that this was an illusion. These authoritarian regimes were not only unable to contain Islamism but, to the contrary, were the best propagandist of the Islamists by letting them appear as the only credible and organized opposition. Western democracies that supported these regimes in the name of anti-terrorism should realize now that their support was not only indecent with regard to their values but that it was also unproductive.

This, of course, does not prejudge of the future of Arab uprisings: will they give birth to democracies or turn into theocracies? No one can say today as things

remain very uncertain. One of the scenarios often mentioned by observers and some Arab intellectuals is an Arab version of the Turkish model based on the transformation of Islamist movements like the Muslim Brothers, *Ennahda* or the Justice and Development Party in Morocco into moderate Islamic conservative parties like the AK Party in Turkey. It is doubtless that Turkey today is a political and ideological reference for many Muslim countries not only in the Arab world but also in Africa South of the Sahara, because of the AK Party capability to apparently reconcile modernity with Islamic values and norms. The question is to what extent is the comparison relevant. Does any Arab country dispose of the range of assets that made it possible for Turkey to appear as an emerging country on the international level and a political model for its neighbours? But whatever may be the future, there is no doubt that Arab Islamists have been roughly confronted with the exercise of power. It is easier to be in the opposition and to criticize than to have to take decisions, especially as those who elected them were expecting a lot from them and mainly, the restoration of public morality and the fight against corruption along with economic and social better being. These claims played a crucial role in the Arab uprisings. Thanks to their ostentatious attachment to religion, the Islamists were perceived as their most sincere and resolute defenders and we can suppose that it is still largely so in many Arab countries. But Islamists who aspire to power have to accept to be accountable for their acts: this is what democracy means.

The Weakening of Traditional Schemes of Authority
As everyone noticed, youth and women played a major if not a central role in the Arab popular uprisings, thus questioning the resilience of traditional schemes of authority. What does the mobilization of these junior social actors tell us on Arab and Muslim societies and on the systems of inequality and domination that organize them? What does it tell us about the patterns of authority in the domestic sphere and the relationship to political obedience and authoritarianism?

Before entering this discussion, a preliminary remark: the visibility of youth and women during these uprisings seems to have induced a radical though maybe short-lived change in the Western perception of these two categories of actors. Until then and as a consequence of September 11th, young Muslims were perceived as constituting the fighting cohorts of Al-Qaeda and Islamist global terrorism, which to some extent evoked the famous dangerous classes of the 19th Century! Thanks to these uprisings, the same young Muslims are now considered as the leading democratic force and the most open one in Muslim and Arab societies to westernized way of life and values, and to the dynamics of globalization including the internet, social networks, twitter and so on. I don't think that any of these two perceptions is fully well-founded but they deserve to be thought about.

But whatever may be the relevance of these perceptions, there is no doubt that the increasing visibility of youth and women in the public sphere underlines the deep changes that have for years been affecting the traditional schemes of authority and the family structures in Muslim and Arab societies. Briefly, many of these societies have achieved what demographers call the demographic transition, i.e. the passage from very high birth rates and rates of mortality to Western figures of birth and mortality: in the 1970, Arab women's fertility was of 7 to 8 children; It is now of 2,0 in Tunisia, 2,4 in Morocco, 1,7 in Lebanon, 2,3 in Bahrain, the same as in Iran and Turkey. These rates are a little higher in Egypt (3,25), in Syria (3,5) or in Jordan (3,6) (Courbage and Todd, 2007: 66). It took two centuries to Europe to achieve its demographic transition and only four decades for Arab countries to do the same!

The consequences of these changes have not always been fully measured, especially with regard to their effects on family structures: Briefly, by considerably reducing the size of the family, the decrease of birth rates has also destabilized its internal hierarchies based on the authority of the father – the patriarch – and the elder son. At the same time, the greater access to education by girls challenges gender hierarchies while the general rise of education levels affects the generational hierarchies. In a word, the family patriarchal order is seriously undermined and new figures of authority are emerging. From a scientific point of view, these changes are crucial insofar as they raise new issues and question our analyses of Muslim and Arab societies. To take only two examples, these changes represent a clear reconsideration of some anthropological explanations of political authoritarianism in the Arab world, such as Hisham Sharabi's (1988) elaboration of the concept of neo-patriarchy or Abdallah Hammoudi's (2001) study of the relationship between master and disciple and their transposition from the domestic or religious sphere to the political one. As a result, more emphasis should be put on the processes of individualization and "subjectification" at work in Muslim and Arab societies. More attention from policy makers and researchers should be given to these dynamics, to youth and women as actors of social change, and to the way Muslim perceptions and practices are changing. In *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, Benjamin Soares and I, following specialists of Islam in the Arab world such as Patrick Haenni and Tjistke Holtrop (2002), put forward the concept of *Islam mondain* in French, which can be translated as Islam in the present world as a way to relativize the centrality of approaches focusing on Islamism and to get to the complexity of social changes in the Muslim world. To get back to the Arab popular uprisings, they certainly have more to do with the individual's changing relation to authority than with Islamism even if the Islamists have appropriated them. But the paradox of the Arab uprisings is that they bring together the idea of the subject and the activation of feelings of belonging, thus raising the issue of cultural pluralism and its regulation. This is the fourth and final part of these reflections.

Democracy and Cultural Pluralism: A Tentative Comparison between Africa and the Arab World

To introduce this discussion, a prefatory statement is required: this statement is about the apparent relation between the downfall of authoritarian regimes and the rise or even the exacerbation of ethnic or religious claims. This was the case in Africa south of the Sahara after the democratic transitions of the 1990's and it is the same now in the Arab world as the question of minorities comes to the top of the political agenda, in Egypt where the *Copts* think they are discriminated against by the Muslim majority and feel more and more afraid with the rise of the Muslim Brothers and the *salafis*, in Syria where the crisis is perceived as a conflict between the *Alaouite* minority, backed by other confessional minorities like the *Druzes* and the *Christians*, and the vast *Sunni* majority, in Iraq where the federal system has not – but is it really surprising? – eased the antagonism between the three major groups, the *Xia*, the *Sunnis* and the *Kurds*.

At this point, maybe is it necessary to recall three things often neglected or forgotten.

First, the apparent relation between democratic transitions and the resurgence of identity politics does not imply any nostalgia for authoritarian regimes. Second, the current recurrence of ethnic or religious mobilizations in Africa or in the Arab world is a reminder of the fact that these two regions are diverse and that it is an abuse of language to talk of one Africa or one Arab world. Finally the idea that heterogeneity is not the privilege of African or Arab or Asian societies, unless we implicitly think that heterogeneity is a stigma characterizing the "traditional" or even "primitive" societies of the South, by opposition to the homogeneous modern societies of the North. Even these societies witness complex dynamics of heterogeneity and many of them are pluralistic while being also democratic. So the problem is not pluralism in itself but its regulation and the question is not the compatibility of democracy with cultural pluralism but how politics and institutions affect collective identities and how collective identities interact with politics and institutions.

Much has been said and written on ethnicity in Africa while the issue of minorities in the Arab World, though until recently overshadowed by the ideological prevalence of Arab nationalism, was assessed with regard to authoritarianism and the Khaldounian concept of *Assabiyya* as reformulated, for example, by the late French researcher Michel Seurat (2012). This issue is so huge that it sounds more realistic to concentrate on three points: the strategic use of the majority principle; the regulation of cultural pluralism as a political and not necessarily a democratic constraint; and the limits of power sharing formulas.

The majority principle refers to the politics of unanimity conducted for decades by authoritarian regimes in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world. In both cases, the accent was put on national unity as the only way to build the nation and to enter

modernity. National identity was the only legitimate one and it couldn't cope with any other identity, religious, ethnic, tribal or regional. But in fact, the rhetoric of national unity was often the way to legitimize the domination of a group on the others: either the domination of a majority group on the minority (the Arabs versus the Kabyle/Berbers in Algeria), or the domination of a minority group on the other groups: the Sunnis in Iraq until the end of Saddam Hussein or the *Alaouites* in Syria. By using the concept of *Assabiyya*, Michel Seurat argued very convincingly that the ruling elites in these two countries came from minority *assabiyyat* and used the *ba'athist* ideology to legitimize their domination and make it normal and unquestionable insofar as the Arab identity to which the regime claimed its commitment had vocation to transcend any other identity, religious, sectarian, ethnic or linguistic. The same logic could be seen elsewhere in the Arab world: in Bahrain, where the Sunni minority imposes its domination on the *Xia* majority, in Sudan where the Northern political and religious elites tempted for years to impose their Arab and Islamic values and norms on the South.

In Africa South of the Sahara, where it was difficult if not impossible to impose the majority principle, partly because there was no ideology such as Pan-Arabism, it was the figure of the nation that was supposed to abolish and replace any other alternative identity. But the logic was the same as in the Arab world in the sense that the postcolonial state claimed to fight against ethnicity while it was contaminated by ethnic cleavages and competition, thus often driving politics to a zero sum game. This is to say that violence may be a structural component of authoritarian rule but its price may sometimes be too high, bringing into necessity negotiated forms of regulation.

Actually, the regulation of pluralism is a permanent negotiation between actors with unequal access to resources, a system of interactions made of constraints and opportunities. Moreover, regulation must be considered as a process, a technology of power which, from this perspective, is not identified with any political regime, democratic or not, in particular. Thus, to regulate is not a matter of democratic conviction but a strategic necessity aiming at reducing the political cost of domination, stabilizing the regime by bringing to it social supports, and channelling identity claims. With very few exceptions, all Arab and African authoritarian regimes have put in place various forms and procedures of regulation, either by co-opting prominent or highly symbolic figures from the other groups, or by building trans-communitarian networks based on common economic interests. This was the case in Saddam's Iraq at its peak and this is the case in Assad's Syria. In Africa South of the Sahara, this politics is known as the politics of regional balance, defined as the capacity of the authoritarian regime to incorporate figures of the main ethno-regional groups in order to reduce centrifugal pressures and to give the appearance of social and political consensus. Côte d'Ivoire under FXB and Cameroon until now are

exemplary cases of this mode of regulation which, of course, is ultimately a system of inclusion and exclusion, with insiders and outsiders. This mode of regulation may of course have advantages as far as it prevents ties of blood to degenerate into rivers of blood, to put it like D. Horowitz (1984: 684), but it must not be confused with power sharing while it is only limited association with power.

From this point of view, the available institutional frameworks like federalism and a consociational system may organize power sharing and peaceful competition for power in plural societies. It is thus not surprising that these formulas appear very seductive in the context of democratic transitions. Federalism already exists in Africa, mainly in Nigeria and Ethiopia, though there are significant differences between the two models, and Iraq has been experiencing it for some years now, with its own specificities. Lebanon is in the Arab world the only case of consociational democracy based on the unequal access to power of the 18 different religious groups officially recognised. It would be interesting to analyse each case and to evaluate its political efficiency but I prefer to insist on the idea that there is no ideal system. A power sharing system is not necessarily the solution and a majority based one does not inevitably lead to tyranny. In Nigeria, federalism was conceived as a way to stabilize the country but it has resulted in the exacerbation of local identities. Moreover, federalism seems unable to prevent the hardening of religious and sectarian conflicts, and to oppose *Boko Haram*. In Iraq, federalism, a solution largely imposed by the United States, has identically exacerbated the cleavages between *Sunnis*, *Xia* and *Kurds*. So is the case with Lebanon where, as we know, the consociational system did not prevent the civil war that the country faced from 1975 to 1990. What these three examples suggest is that a power sharing system may have effects totally opposed to those which are expected, and mainly a hardening rather than a softening of cultural cleavages. But separation is not necessarily the alternative solution. In Sudan, the independence of the South, strongly supported by what is called the international community, was perhaps inevitable but it still has not led to peace with the North. Whatever the system may be, its efficiency ultimately depends on the will of people to live together and on the elite's capacity to compromise. This is true for Arab and African countries but it is also true for our European countries where recent events show that even elites who are supposed to have a strong democratic culture are not always ready to compromise.

These popular uprisings were largely unpredicted by political scientists though some of them pointed the growing social, economic and political unrest in many parts of the Arab world during the recent years. While their outcome remains uncertain. This round table aims at addressing some theoretical and epistemological questions posed to political science by Arab revolutions, in the light of African democratic transitions, likely to suggest useful analytical elements for a better understanding of the future of these revolutions.

The outcomes of Arab popular uprisings remain deeply uncertain as is the perspective of an authentic democratization. From this point of view, it is interesting to note that, despite the hopes expressed by many Arab and non-Arab observers, the "domino effect" of these uprisings proved to be limited and many Arab authoritarian regimes were not concerned by this wave or succeeded in neutralizing political and social contestation. Indeed this capability poses new questions to social sciences and underlines once again the resilience of Arab authoritarianism. Nevertheless, these uprisings have disqualified once for all the idea of an Arab or Muslim authoritarian exceptionalism. At the same time, they question the way social sciences, and mainly political science, have until now approached the issues of political change, authoritarianism, or democracy and democratization in the Arab world. It is more than time now for political science to draw theoretical and epistemological lessons from these uprisings.

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