The Arab Winter: Democratic Consolidation, Civil War, and Radical Islamists

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On July 25, 2021, Tunisia’s president, Kais Saied, suspended the country’s parliament and dismissed the prime minister. To justify these extraordinary actions, President Saied invoked Article 80 of the constitution, the emergency clause for threats to the country’s security and independence. Until these political manoeuvres, Tunisia was regarded as the Arab Spring’s lone success story. Despite numerous moments of government deadlock and several high-profile assassinations, the country’s political elite had managed to navigate various crises, holding several free and fair elections that facilitated the peaceful transfer of power between parties in the parliament and between presidential administrations. Given the relative success of the Tunisian democratic transition, what explains the recent usurpation of executive power by President Saied?

In The Arab Winter: Democratic Consolidation, Civil War, and Radical Islamists, Stephen J. King offers readers a compelling answer. Published prior to President Saied’s seizure of power, King highlights the political challenge that countries in the Middle East and North Africa have faced since authoritarian collapse reverberated throughout the region during the Arab uprisings. King divides democratization into three stages: authoritarian breakdown, democratic transition, and democratic consolidation. Democratic consolidation, King argues, is the most difficult.

So, what is democratic consolidation? In The Arab Winter, King splits democratic consolidation into five different types of “pacts” that contribute to securing a transition to democracy in the long run. First, there is a military pact; democratic consolidation is best achieved when civilian control over the military has been formalized. Second, democratic consolidation is facilitated by a commitment by all political parties to compete according to the electoral rules and renounce violence (political pact). Third, countries transitioning to democracy need to establish a socio-economic pact in which the government combats corruption, reforms the private sector, and pursues robust social policy to address issues like poverty and unemployment. Fourth, democratic consolidation demands a nation-state pact that establishes a modern Weberian state with a monopoly on violence. Finally, a transitional justice and rule of law pact ensures that judicial reforms are executed and policies that promote truth-telling and restorative justice are pursued. While not all of these pacts are required for democratization, identifying the components of each helps to pinpoint the ways in which transitions can be achieved – and derailed.

To highlight how each of these elements contributes to democratic consolidation or, conversely, authoritarian retrenchment, King examines six cases from the Arab
world: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. In Libya, for example, King contends that the absence of a strong nation-state with a monopoly on the use of force greatly diminished the possibility of successful democratic consolidation. A similar challenge exists in Yemen. Conversely, in Egypt, King finds that while the nation-state pact is largely intact, high polarization between the main political factions undermined the political pact, and the lack of civilian control over the military impeded a military pact.

Returning to Tunisia, King highlights the success of the nation-state, military, and political pacts, while simultaneously calling attention to the absence of a new socioeconomic or transitional justice and rule of law pact in the country. King argues that Tunisia’s democracy faces obstacles because the lack of economic reforms has contributed to mass frustration and because key aspects of judicial reform, including the establishment of a constitutional court have not been realized. The focus on socioeconomic frustrations and challenges to the rule of law in the country now seem prescient. Indeed, protests over social policy and unemployment have continued in recent years. And, after President Saeid’s seizure of power, a constitutional court able to stand up to executive power is sorely missed. There are, however, other obstacles to democratic consolidation that seem important with the benefit of hindsight. For instance, the Tunisian case underscores the need for political pacts to extend beyond the political elite, especially when political parties are weak and most citizens are not strong partisans.

The Arab Winter highlights several productive avenues for future research on democratization and authoritarian retrenchment. First, while King clearly defines each of the five pacts that are instrumental to democratic consolidation, it is less clear how these different components are interrelated and how they should be prioritized. King underlines the critical importance of the nation-state pact given how national unity and a monopoly on use of force can facilitate the other four pacts. But the question remains: is a nation-state pact a necessary condition for any of the other elements of democratic consolidation to be realized? How are the various pacts that King outlines related to each other and is there a particular ordering that is more or less advantageous to democratization?

Second, in highlighting the importance of the nation-state pact, King argues that it is hard to nation-build and institute competitive elections simultaneously. However, it is clear from the chapters on Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq that autocratic leaders have also failed to nation-build even in the absence of divisive electoral competition. Moreover, there are conditions under which electoral competition seems to facilitate cooperation over time. For instance, over the course of the conflict in Iraq, political actors like Muqtada al-Sadr have had evolving positions vis-à-vis national unity. Sadr was once regarded as a highly divisive leader of a Shia militia but is now widely viewed as a staunch Iraqi nationalist capable of productive outreach to religious minorities and other political parties. The Arab Winter highlights that more work is needed to understand the relationship between regime type and the process of nation-building.

King’s book is a significant contribution to research on the Middle East and North Africa region and comparative democratization. The Arab Winter speaks to the failures of the “Arab Spring,” locating democratization’s defeat in the challenge of democratic consolidation. Theoretically, the book deepens our understanding of the various
processes that comprise democratization and provides a useful framework for studying potential sources of authoritarian retrenchment.

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