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Puzzles of Political Change in the Middle East

Political Liberalisation, Authoritarian Resilience and the Question of Systemic Change

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Abstract

One decade after the Arab uprisings of 2010/11, the present discussion paper revisits processes of political change in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with a focus on the question of systemic change. Core questions in this context are: How, among all possible varieties of political change, do we know when political change is systemic? When do we speak of "democratisation", and when of "authoritarian upgrading" or "- re-consolidation"? Can we predict such processes? If not, can we at least tell when systemic transition is more or less likely to occur, and what influences its occurrence? The three parts of this discussion paper build on one another in order to address and answer these puzzles.

The introduction is followed by a conceptual second section (Section 2) that establishes the analytical frame of reference by discussing and defining key concepts needed for understanding and analysing change of and change in political regimes. That way, Part I can then review democratisation theories (Section 3) and distil, from these, variables that aim at explaining why sometimes nondemocratic regimes transform into democracies, whereas in other cases they do not (Section 4). Yet, not all political change is democratising in nature; hence Part II complements the picture by investigating theories of authoritarian resilience (Section 5). From that, it extracts (in Section 6) conditions for authoritarian survival. Based on this analytical groundwork, Part III turns towards the experience of the MENA region and, in a comprehensive section (Section 7), attempts at offering an overview and assessment of political change in that world region by looking at both structural conditions and strategic choices actors have made.

In conclusion (Section 8), the view that Tunisia remains the exceptional case of an at least initially successful transition to democracy is supported.

As democratisation is the outcome most feared by those who hold executive power in most MENA countries, autocrats are – in addition to conducive political and economic factors in the international and regional environments – engaged in constant processes of exchange and "authoritarian learning". They have devised elaborate strategies to avoid just that: democratisation. Among the most important of such strategies is political reform and liberalisation, which enhance the immediate life expectancy of authoritarian regimes, but at the same time may nurture popular frustration in the long run. However, frustration in large segments of society makes systemic change, if and when it occurs, more likely to be violent and occur through rupture rather than to be peaceful and arise from negotiation. This, in turn, does not bode well for democratisation. Today's processes of political reform and liberalisation hence tend to effectively prevent systemic change in the short and medium term, *and* they make violent conflict (including possible state breakdown) a more likely outcome than democratisation in the long run.

Contents

Abbreviations

DIE	German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik
DP	democracy promotion
DV	dependent variable
EU	European Union
FDI	foreign direct investment
fsQCA	fuzzy-set/qualitative comparative analysis
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	gross domestic product
GONGO	government-organised non-governmental organisation
IPR	index of power resources
IV	independent variable
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PR	public relations
SMEs	small and medium-sized enterprises
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USD	United States dollar
VNCA	voluntary non-commercial associations

Executive summary

This study has been mandated by the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) in order to prepare the conceptual and theoretical groundwork for an examination of questions about political change in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. More particularly, the question asked is how, among all the varieties of political change, do we know when such change is systemic? When do we speak of "democratisation", and when of "authoritarian upgrading" or "-re-consolidation"? And can we predict such processes? If not, can we at least tell when they are more or less likely to occur, and what influences their occurrence? Still more precisely, the two questions posed to the author of the paper by the commissioning institution are:

(1) Have the changes witnessed in the Arab region since 2010/11 led to systemic transitions? And for those cases in which the answer is "no":

(2) Have political changes, and in particular the reforms enacted in reaction to the protests in several countries of the region, made systemic transitions *more likely* than before?

The aim of the present discussion paper is thus to provide an analytical tool that is specifically dedicated to detecting the types of political changes that can be observed in the MENA region in order to distinguish them from types of political changes that are not seen in that region. The paper hence consists of three parts, two theoretical and a MENA-specific one, which can be read separately, but the parts inherently belong together to answer the questions this paper centers on. The ambition is thus to generate a tool that is, in subsequent studies, applicable to individual cases empirically and enables researchers, analysts and decision-makers to avoid false assessments of polities that would create wrong expectations about the future and, as a consequence, almost inevitably lead to flawed policy formulations and implementations.

This paper addresses these guiding questions by, after an introduction, first reviewing and discussing a number of core concepts that are indispensable for the scientific discussion of systemic vs. non-systemic political change (Section 2). In particular, such discussion requires clearly and sharply defined understandings – based on the state of the art in existing research – of what a "political regime" is, of "democracy" and "authoritarianism" as regime types, of "transition" as the systemic change *of* political regime (as opposed to change *within* regime, as through reform processes), and of "democratisation" (and "authoritarianisation") as particular types of systemic transition, as well as of "political (de-)liberalisation" as processes of change within regimes that historically have at times – but more often have not – signalled the advent of systemic transitions.

Based on this word field of key concepts, Part I reviews theories of democratic transitions, that is: Literature on the question as to why sometimes nondemocratic regimes transform into democracies whereas others do not. This is important because that long tradition of research reflects all potential *causes* that have been thought of by generations of scholars as to why democracy might come into being.

Such variables have been identified on all analytical levels: the macro-, meso-, micro- and international levels of analysis. On a macro-level, industrialisation, urbanisation, education or, in short, socio-economic modernisation, the emergence of distinct structures that fulfil different functions within a political system as well as culture have been suggested as important causes of democracy on the macro-level. On a meso-level of analysis, class-constellations, and in particular the role of either the working class or the bourgeoisie, as well as the distribution of power resources within a society have been at the centre of attention. Micro-level analyses emphasise the important role of strategic choices real actors take in game-like situations within a context of several players in order to achieve their most desired outcomes, although such actor-centred approaches do concede that structural conditions provide and determine the breadth of the "corridor of actions" available to those who take decisions. Finally, the international environment has been found to, at times, play a very important role in determining a country's regime type; this goes not only for the (relatively rare) cases of direct military intervention, but also for cases in which one regime type is deliberately promoted by external actors through cross-border economic, cultural, informational or diplomatic strategies that aim at influencing the regime type inside a particular country. Democracy promotion is today an important research field in its own right; furthermore, the (unintentional) structural international context (as opposed to the intentional actor-specific context) as well as trans-border linkages may also play an important role in regime outcomes. Global inequalities and (inter-) dependencies as well as the regime type of surrounding countries – possibly leading to diffusion or "contagion" processes – have all not only been discussed as potential factors, but evidence has also been provided that each of them, under certain conditions, can play a significant role when it comes to questions of a change of regime (type) (for details, see Section 3).

The reason why all this is necessary to know is that, when discussing the politics of a world region (the MENA region) that has the reputation of being ruled politically in the least democratic manner among all world regions, the obvious question is: Which of those factors that have been found as potentially *causing* democratisation are present in the MENA region? In what countries? And in what relative strength or weight when compared to other such variables? Although this paper represents theoretically-based conceptual work, these questions are empirical ones that can *only* be answered – as the most prominent authors on democratisation relentlessly tell their readers – through empirically informed studies on a case-by-case basis.

However, to be informed about the possible and hypothesised causes of democratisation is not enough because not all political change is democratising in nature. Thus, the literature on democratic transitions provides us with analytical tools that are usefully applicable only for a certain range of empirical phenomena. In fact, this only depicts half of the story, whereas the other half is the maintenance of authoritarian rule through change within the system,[1] through international support or intervention, or through other variables that are briefly discussed in Section 4. Yet, the focus of Part II of the paper is on

1 Or even democratisation's logical opposite, that is, the systemic transition away from democratic regimes towards an authoritarian endpoint (or "breakdown of democracy"; see Linz & Stepan, 1978).

the intentional actions of domestic decision-making elites, as power in autocracies is concentrated in few hands whose overriding primary political goal is to avoid the loss of power. While the study of democratisation has a long and venerable history, the study of authoritarian resilience is broad, but much more recent and thus far less structured over time. Part II is thus entitled "Theories of authoritarian resilience" because there is no single such theory; rather, there are numerous variables that have been suggested as being potentially causal in the survival of dictatorships, but for the sake of clarity it may be permissible here. These hypothesised variables are, again, structural ones on the one hand, and ones that emphasise domestic elite actors and their strategic choices on the other. Among the former are factors located in the international sphere such as an autocratic environment, geopolitically motivated military, economic and/or diplomatic support, or outright external autocracy promotion. Second, economic factors such as richness in exportable natural resources such as oil and gas can substantially contribute to autocratic survival and resilience. Third, there are specific types of authoritarianism such as personalist regimes (as opposed to single-party or military regimes) that have statistically been found to be particularly resistant to democratisation. More generally, when patterns of domination enacted by the political regime strongly resemble those that prevail in society at large, this is assumed to contribute to overall regime stability.

Yet, it is important to not lose out of sight the fact that autocrats have much greater decision-making leeway and discretionary powers than do democratic leaders; it is therefore of utmost importance to look at how dictators try to retain power. Sadly, this actor-related second dimension in authoritarian resilience has all too often been ignored or misread, as if the policy goal of an autocrat could rationally be assumed to be the pursuit of a common good such as democratisation. This is not the case. Rather, there are a number of partially overlapping strategies that autocrats pursue in order to avoid transition. Five of these are discussed in Section 5.2 ("Autocrats' strategies of authoritarian survival"):

(1) Increased repression and surveillance

(2) Co-optation, patronage and buying off dissent

(3) Management of oppositional forces

(4) Intensification of divisive identity politics, and

(5) Political reform and liberalisation

This is why special emphasis is placed on not only this fifth section, but also on Part III ("MENA empirics and conclusions"). What both observers and even more so policy-makers in or from Western democratic contexts have routinely overlooked so far is precisely the *logic* according which autocracies function, the logic that guides leaders' strategies in their strife for power maintenance. Although this list of five is almost certainly not exhaustive, these strategies are among the most common practices by which dictators cling to power and try to manipulate both their domestic and international environments in their favour. As in Part I, Section 5 is followed by a brief wrap-up that carves out core features of the proposed variables and poses a number of

guiding questions to be asked in the empirical analysis of individual cases; as before, the overarching question is: Which of these very different structural and actor-related hypothesised variables are present in which cases and to what extent? And how much weight does any single one of these carry in comparison to others that might be present as well (Section 6)?

Part III, finally, takes a very first and cursory look at the world region of interest for this paper, the MENA region. Apart from a few countries in the Persian Gulf, almost all Arab countries had been hit by the wave of mass protests that has been dubbed "the Arab Spring". Its three major outcomes have been (a) state collapse and descent into civil war (Libya, Syria, Yemen); (b) authoritarian hardening and/or re-consolidation (Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Algeria); and (c) democratisation (Tunisia).

Observers have found it difficult to explain why – despite such widespread and large-scale protests, and also despite far-reaching and important changes that have taken place – most Arab countries remain very firmly ruled under authoritarian governance, more often by the dictators who ruled before the protests than not, despite the presence of several factors that the literature has identified to be conducive to democratisation. This becomes understandable only through a focus on those strategies that rulers employ to avoid just that. All five actor-related strategies of authoritarian survival are present and have prominently been employed by rulers and their loyal elites in the post-uprising Arab Middle East and North Africa (see details in Section 7.2). Among the most important of such strategies are political reform and liberalisation, which are modifications of the system without significant changes in the distribution and concentration of political power. The so-called Arab monarchy debate is a strand of literature that can serve to illustrate that phenomenon particularly well. These cases show how autocrats survived protests and how authoritarian regimes remained intact by "upgrading" them into more complex arrangements of loyal oppositionists, regime supporters, militaries and secret services, and at the same time by implementing liberal-looking reforms, which would, however, only deceive outsiders – if anyone – as their core purpose has been, and still is, authoritarian regime maintenance.

Yet, among all these notable, but non-systemic processes of change that ultimately all explicitly aim at the survival of dictatorships, there is in fact one important case of democratisation, and that is the Tunisian exception. No other Arab country has undergone, after 2011, any similar processes of political change *of* regime – which is not to say that no important developments had taken place in countries such as Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Jordan and Morocco or Yemen, but these are not processes of democratisation. When looking at this Tunisian case, there is ample reason to suspect that actor-related factors play a bigger role in explaining the transition to democracy than structural reasons. For one, Tunisia's socio-economic structures do not set it very much apart from other comparable non-oil Arab countries; in fact, there are – from per capita gross domestic product (GDP) to educational levels and economic structures and other development indicators to class relations or pre-protest levels of inequality – numerous similarities to cases of non-transition. Second, there is an important difference between part of the Tunisian elite's behaviour under the stress of mass street protests and that of other countries, and this relates mainly to the split that emerged in Tunis

between the presidency and the president's aides on the one hand, and a military leadership that defected and did not obey presidential orders on the other.

In conclusion, thus, the first question, "Has there been systemic political change in the Arab world post-2011?", can be answered with a clear yes, as there is one (and only one!) case of democratisation (Tunisia). This one case has, however, and counter-intuitively to some, neither been a consequence of mass protests from below nor of reform from above, but rather of elite defection. The remaining Arab countries, from Algeria to Yemen, continue to fulfil all definitional criteria of "authoritarianism", and hence their political systems should be referred to as such – at least to the extent that functioning statehood has survived at all. What matters for the correct assessment of political regimes is the impossibility of change at the "centre of political power" that is so characteristic of democracies, and which does not, at present, seem to be a given in any Arab country that enjoys territorial integrity and a state monopoly over the use of force. This is the qualitative – not gradual! – barrier between democracy and autocracy. And this holds irrespective of different levels of liberality or repression.

Second, the question "How can we know when change is systemic?" is a matter of definitions: A "transition from authoritarian rule" (O'Donnell, Schmitter, & Whitehead, 1986) has happened if and (only) when (1) a political regime has broken down and been defeated, and (2) a new one has successfully been institutionalised and (3) the new regime is either democratic or totalitarian. Such a process has not happened in the Arab world over the past four decades – except, as explained above, in Tunisia.

Third, the question "Have post-uprising political reforms made future transitions to democracy more likely?" is more complex. On the one hand, the likelihood of transition cannot be measured ex ante because of the contingent nature of such non-linear processes. Additionally, even once these processes start to unfold, they do not follow clear trajectories.

On the other hand, if democratisation were to occur, we can state safely that this would represent the outcome that autocrats fear most, and which they thus try hardest to avoid. We also know that these efforts by autocrats at avoiding democratisation by all means are most successful in personalist dictatorships, as they prevail in the Arab world.

Importantly, a vision of transition that views this process as the sum of lots of little steps of reform somehow adding up towards a change of the political regime fundamentally ignores the qualitative nature of changes that transition requires; moreover, it neglects the most important actors' intent. Transition involves, as a rule of thumb, major conflict over political rule and power, and it has hardly ever happened (if at all) without a prior exit from the political stage of the top former decision-makers of the regime. Second, democratic transition also requires that the rules of the political game, that is, the rules about who gets access to power on what grounds, need to be written anew in such a way that the new rules guarantee an inclusive, competitive and participatory political process in which the top decision-making positions are open to free and fair political contestation between competing candidates.

By contrast, political reforms that autocrats initiate from above are always strategies that aim at systems maintenance, not strategies of systems abolishment. Assuming that political leaders in autocracies were somehow too stupid or too little circumspect to learn the lessons of Ceaușescu, Ghaddafi, Pinochet, Honecker, Ben Ali and others – that is, that they would commit errors so grave that transition could be an unintended outcome – would be an extraordinarily naïve error that serious analysts or policy-makers will refrain from committing. Rather, today's autocrats are actively engaged in constant mutual learning processes. One of the very clear and established lessons to be learnt from current research is that political reform from above enhances the life expectancy of dictators in office rather than making transition more likely. It is therefore safe to say that political reform in authoritarian regimes makes transitions to democracy less likely, at least in the short to medium term. This is the general rule. Yet, one counter-argument can legitimately be made: Populations that experience deceit numerous times, and thus recognise the emptiness of promises that political reforms carry with them, might be increasingly frustrated with their political regimes and their elites, thereby increasing their risk proneness towards radical solutions of regime change in the long run, *ceteris paribus*. Yet, the likelihood that change by rupture will be democratic is lower than if change is brought about through negotiation and pacts between regime elites and the opposition.

1 Background: Motivation and starting points

Starting in late 2010, and continuing until this day, albeit in different locations and with varying intensity, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and the Arab countries more particularly, have seen a series of "irregular" processes in the form of mass public protests, revolutions and societal upheavals against incumbent regimes that had not been witnessed since the post-colonial era of social revolutions during the 1950s and early 1960s. When faced with these protests, incumbent political regimes reacted in various ways by: resorting to higher-than-previous levels of repression (Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, Qatar and others); seeking to buy off dissent materially through a "bag of goodies" to be distributed to citizens (all Arab monarchies and most republics); enacting a discourse of promises for change (i.a. Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Syria); lifting (Algeria), maintaining (Egypt) or enacting (Syria) a state of emergency; or embarking on intensified policies and rhetoric of reform from above (all Arab countries) and/or on partial and selective political and/or societal liberalisation (i.a. Morocco, Yemen, Algeria, briefly: Egypt). These have been among the most prominent reactions of ruling elites to these challenges. Remarkably, although there has been some innovation, most of these strategies have long been tried and tested, as they had already been used by Arab autocracies to react to domestic popular dissent in previous decades.

Although the period of heightened political mobilisation and protest itself proved short-lived, the consequences are still visible and, arguably, will be so for a longer period of time. We have seen instances of democratisation, of authoritarian re-calibration and hardening, and instances where central political order or statehood as such has been lost with the ousting of a prior political regime. These three patterns are qualitatively distinct from one another and pose categorically different types of challenges for both domestic elites as well as the international environment. At a most superficial level, therefore, the systemic change of a political regime requires analysis that is separate from the loss of statehood. The breakdown of statehood as such is, once it happens, quite obviously visible, as it usually comes with large-scale domestic and/or international(-ised) armed conflict, with competing claims to the state apparatus being made by two or more social forces, and with the visible loss of central political authority. This is an important and relevant political outcome, but it is not the focus of this paper. In many instances, the consequences of the 2011 Arab uprisings seem harder to gauge than the loss of central political order and the emergence of civil or international war. They are also harder to correctly assess to the lay observer, as they concern changes *in* or *of* political regimes (which is not the same), rather than in statehood.[2] This is so because the analysis of political regime change requires familiarity with the most important concepts and theories that exist about (a) the analysis of political regimes (static, definitional) and (b) the nature of processes of political regime change more broadly (procedural, theoretical[3]).

Therefore, open questions remain for many observers: How, among all the varieties of political change, do we know when political change is systemic? When do we speak of democratisation, and when of authoritarian upgrading or re-consolidation? And can we

2 We thus need to properly distinguish between political regime and state. See definitions of key concepts in the following Section 2.

3 Strictly defined, a theory is a set of interlinked causal hypotheses, each of which links two or more different independent variables to a dependent variable, which is the *explanandum*.

predict such processes? If not, can we at least tell when they are more or less likely to occur and what influences their occurrence? Although both the question about the causes of the recent upheavals and the question on how results should be grasped analytically have triggered a large body of academic literature, questions like the ones above can sometimes pose challenges.

A very short but correct answer to the above questions is, of course, that the first is a matter of checking with the definition of "systemic change" so that the answer can relatively easily be given: If the definitional elements of "systemic change" are present in a given case, we speak of systemic change – and if not, we don't. The second question on predictability or likelihood is a matter of principle: As neither the point in time nor the occurrence of a systemic political transformation itself can be predicted *in principle* (and there is even literature that scientifically explains why this is not possible; see e.g. Goodwin, 2011), and much less so its outcomes, the short answer is no. We cannot predict political transitions. But that is, of course, only a very truncated part of the truth and does not mean that we have no clues about their likelihood. Seventy years of research in transitology and another twenty years of research on authoritarian survival have in fact created at least some knowledge, and it is necessary to be familiar with what together makes for almost a century of cumulative efforts in knowledge-building. Without that knowledge, the likelihood of systemic political change cannot be assessed on a basis that goes deeper than subjective feelings.

Whereas the former question ("Has transition occurred?") is indeed a matter of definition, the latter is much more a matter of identifying the correct *variables* that work in favour of, and against, systemic political change, that is: We need to identify conditions that make future systemic political change more likely, and also not lose sight of variables that pull in the opposite direction, that is, that make systemic political change less likely, all the while acknowledging that prediction is different from assessing conditions of likelihood. Even if, on the basis of a thorough analysis of both groups of factors – namely those that push towards systemic transition and those that pull against it – we would dare to predict whether or not transition will occur within a specified timeframe in the future, such predictions would still be imperfect. What is possible, however, is to assess (1) whether the factors we assume to be relevant for predicting the likelihood of a future event are the correct ones, and (2) whether they are analysed and interpreted in a correct way. In order to do so, it is inevitable to understand the pertinent literature that has examined the effects of such variables.

This paper deliberately does not discuss the possibility of *state* breakdown and violent conflict as a consequence of *regime* breakdown, as happened in Libya and Yemen post-2011 and in Iraq post-2003; this would extend the scope of the present paper far beyond what was commissioned and what is feasible in the present framework. For the most part, it therefore consciously omits discussions about state erosion, decay, and violent conflict in the absence of statehood. It focuses instead on those instances in which central political order has continued to exist after the mass uprisings of 2011.

Hence, the two core questions guiding the paper are:

(1) Have the changes witnessed in the Arab region since 2010/11 led to systemic transitions? – and how do we know when change is systemic? And for those cases in which the answer is "no":

(2) Have political changes, and in particular the reforms enacted in reaction to the protests in several countries of the region, made systemic transitions *more likely* than before?

For the purpose of tackling these two questions, the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) has commissioned this concept paper in order to discuss these themes with the aim of providing at least preliminary answers to the above questions.

This paper has been conceptualised as the first in a series of three.[4] It aims at laying the conceptual and theoretical groundwork upon which concrete inquiries into specific cases can then be based and conducted in a structured manner. Although most of the concepts involved in the study of political regimes and transition (such as "power", "authority", "actor constellation" or even "elite") do not lend themselves easily to quantified operationalisation, one purpose of this paper is to furnish observers with the core criteria for assessing those factors that work to spur or prevent systemic political change.

To explain and help make the political dynamics seen in the MENA region after 2011 understandable (again, excluding for the moment questions of state collapse), it is imperative to look at approaches that can explain processes of democratisation on the one hand, and authoritarian survival or even re-consolidation on the other.

In order to arrive at that goal, the paper is – after these introductory paragraphs and a very important following chapter on key concepts, terms and definitions (Section 2) – broadly structured into three parts: First, factors influencing democratisation are presented and discussed; second, the same is done with factors that influence authoritarian survival; and third, a first empirical glance is cast on the MENA region before conclusions summarise core findings.

Part I reviews the main theoretical approaches that have been advanced to study systemic change in the field that has come to be called "transitology". While virtually all authors today agree that mono-causality is an illusion, there is no consensus about what causal variables have the greatest explanatory power and, thus, are more important to examine than others when explaining political transitions from one regime type to another in any particular case. Logically, it is necessary to identify those factors we assume to *cause* systemic transitions towards democracy in order to reflect about the latter's likelihood. This is because no "symptoms" (regime transitions) can occur without "causes" (variables that cause the effect of "transition"). As various explanatory approaches hypothesise *different* variables to be causal in regime change, these approaches need to be reviewed, and their hypothesised causal variables need to be distilled from the literature. Section 3 therefore reviews the major approaches on four analytical levels (macro-, meso-, micro- and international levels) so that, building on these insights, Section 4 can determine and distil those factors that, according to the current state of the literature, are thought of as causal variables which make systemic political change in the sense of democratisation occur. It furthermore determines those criteria that, according to the definition of transition, need to be fulfilled in order to speak of systemic change or, synonymously, transition or political regime change. Together, therefore, Sections 3 and 4 discuss the "push-factors" towards systemic political change and away from dictatorship.

4 The second and third papers are empirically based and examine specific cases from the MENA region (here: the non-oil monarchies of Jordan and Morocco) against the conceptual and theoretical background established in the present concept paper.

Part II then shifts perspectives and looks at the "pull-factors" that work towards the resilience and survival of autocracy: In contrast to Part I, the focus lies not on theories of regime transition, and thus *regime breakdown*, but on factors that make for authoritarian *survival*, that is, Part II looks at political change from the opposite perspective and assesses factors that the literature has identified as contributing to *regime maintenance and survival*. Section 5 provides a cursory look at the literature on authoritarian resilience as it was published over the past 15 years, and it zooms in on one such actor-focused strand of the literature that is deemed to be of particular importance. Although the study of authoritarianism has become the fastest-growing field in the discipline of Comparative Politics, and although this literature most prominently looks at "authoritarian resilience", it is obvious that – in comparison to the 70 years of transitology research presented in Part I – this literature is much younger (hardly two decades old). It is thus understandable that it is much less coherent, that its initial findings have been tested far less than hypotheses of democratisation theory, and that much of it still remains largely exploratory and is based on observation and induction rather than long-term comparative checking.[5] Much like in its parallel section – Section 3 – on democratisation theory, there are structural as well as actor-related factors that impact the likelihood of authoritarian survival. Although both are discussed, emphasis is laid here on actor-related variables, as these are often misread and misinterpreted (and sometimes it is even obvious that this is precisely the intent guiding autocrats in their decisions). Thus, apart from structural international, economic and regime-related factors, it is the various strategies and techniques pursued by autocrats trying to survive in office and maintain power that this section focuses on. As there are both push- *and* pull-factors, factors that spur *and* factors that prevent transition, both sides need to be considered in order to gain the full picture.[6] Until quite recently, however, scholars had, in their vast majority, turned a blind eye towards the pull-side of the equation, which is in focus here.

Section 6, mirroring Section 4 of Part I, then distils core pull-factors from the literature that allow us to know which variables need to be closely inspected when empirical cases are scrutinised. Even though operationalisation in the details remains a task for empirical studies, this section – like its predecessor, which focuses on the push-factors of democratisation – lists core criteria to be observed when asking about the prospect of systemic breakdown and regime transition vs. regime survival. Mostly derived from the discussion in Section 5, it also contains both structural variables and ones that depend on actors' choices, and it places at least equal weight on the latter, as these are manifold, and the toolkit or the "menu of manipulation" – as one prominent author called it (Schedler, 2002) – is broader and better publicly known than some of the structural factors.

This shift of perspectives in Part II is needed because logically, it is not possible to make informed statements about the likelihood of transitions without it. Part II is thus key to developing an analytical understanding of the nature of political change.

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5 "Comparative checking" is used in a Sartorian sense here to refer to long-term, deductive and variable-oriented (as opposed to case-oriented) research. In fact, it is only over the past few years that the first-ever larger databases on authoritarian regimes have been established (several in 2017-2019 alone!); they now compete for survival in the academic landscape. For an overview of both the literature and the databases, see Schlumberger (2017) and Schlumberger and Schedler (2020).

6 Any assessment on the basis of transitology research alone would be inappropriate, as evidenced by a large body of now obsolete literature of the 1990s, which is today called the "demo-crazy" phase of research.

Finally, Part III consists of a first glance at MENA empirics. Apart from giving a brief overview of the history of the region between 2010 and 2020, in particular of the mass uprisings and their consequences (see Section 7.1), Section 7 chiefly refers back to the previous parts, in that it takes a first and cursory, but nevertheless indicative view at some – selected – factors that have been established as relevant by more general literature. It looks at whether and how such factors are present in today's MENA context and, if so, how they play out in exemplary cases and as a general trend in the empirics of that region (Section 7.2). But rather than a broad survey of all possible push- and pull-factors, this section is limited to a range of actor-centred pull-factors that regimes employ in order to avoid systemic political change, even though other structural variables, such as the international arena and economic structures, are touched upon in passing.[7] Most prominent among regimes' reactions to the political challenges that have occurred following the 2011 uprisings are political reform and political liberalisation. These are among the strategies that aim at authoritarian survival. Even though it may sound banal in the abstract, such reforms have been implemented with the *goal of maintaining the status quo* of existing power constellations rather than with the aim of regime breakdown and subsequent democratisation. Section 7.3 then goes into details and presents the so-called Arab monarchy debate, which is one particular strand of literature that examines why, during the Arab uprisings, none of the monarchical autocracies fell, whereas at least three of their republican counterparts did (Tunisia, Libya and Yemen). The overall assessment is inconclusive here, but what becomes clear is that none of the Arab monarchies have undergone a systemic transition in any way, and that the available indicators speak in favour of their enhancement rather than their crumbling or weakening. In these countries, democratisation – as one particular mode of systemic transition – is off limits for the foreseeable future. To round things up, a last sub-section complements the monarchy debate with some remarks on the exceptional republican case of Tunisia.

The second part of Part III consists of the conclusions (Section 8), which try to give tentative answers to the two core questions raised above. Although it is clear that the purpose of a conceptual paper cannot be an extensive empirical analysis, it is nevertheless possible – not least because such empirical analyses already exist in no small number – to give an informed judgement and answer to these two questions. These answers are based on the combined look at both variables that spur democratisation and ones that spur authoritarian survival or enhancement. As this paper argues throughout, such a bifurcated approach is both necessary for any analysis – and at the very least "informed speculation" about the *likelihood* of systemic political change – as well as for making sense of the various kinds of political changes and dynamics observed in the contemporary Arab world (and beyond).

After hundreds of scholarly contributions that have turned this question of political change and its debated nature into *the* dominant topic of all political science literature on the MENA region over the past 10 years, this literature has by now reached a very broad scholarly consensus about the fact that the vast majority of cases of post-2011 political change consists of instances of "authoritarian upgrading", authoritarian re-calibration or authoritarian re-consolidation, in short: processes of political change that fall qualitatively short of "systemic

7 As in Section 5, this choice is justified because they represent the most misread and misinterpreted and yet crucially important factors; therefore, they stand out as the most important ones to correctly understand if the goal is to make informed statements about future possibilities and the likelihood of future systemic change.

change". Processes of the latter kind have characterised the majority of cases in the MENA region during the post-2011 decade. The overwhelming nature of political change in the MENA after 2011 is thus one of "change within", or authoritarian regime resilience and survival. Empirical cases comprise all Arab monarchies as well as, most prominently, the republics of Algeria and Egypt plus, apart from the Arab countries, potentially Iran. This means that almost 75 per cent of the core countries of the MENA region have experienced authoritarian resilience or re-consolidation over the last decade, whereas a change of political regime (defined in Section 2 below) occurred in only 27 per cent of the cases.[8] There is also an absolutely unanimous agreement among the scholarly community that there is *only one case* that is considered an instance of democratisation (i.e., according to all regularly used academic definitions; more in Section 2 below), and that is Tunisia.

To facilitate a sound analysis of the nature of political change, independently of the geographical place it occurs, the Annex (A1 and A2) presents a checklist in the form of tables that, in yet shorter form, present what has been distilled from Sections 4 and 6. It lists hypothesised variables as discussed in the pertinent literatures on democratisation as well as the literature on authoritarian survival and resilience. This is done in order to provide those who wish to engage in country analyses with a tool to engage in the empirical analysis of political change in any given country, and to ensure that they (a) do not run a risk of omitting important variables and (b) do not record or misread variables for what they only seem to be instead of enhancing our understanding.

8 This calculation excludes the special cases of Iraq (a failed state before 2011), Palestine (lack of sovereign statehood) and Lebanon (first, the country is stricken in chronic state fragility, and second, a longer than possible discussion would be needed in order to explain the seeming paradox that the country is characterised by liberal multi-partyism and pluralist modes of governance yet does not, in academic standards, qualify as a democracy according to the most prominent definitions to that concept).

2 Terminology and definitions

"Transitology" is a term coined by Philippe Schmitter to denote the research field in which scholars study the systemic change of one type of political regime to another, while the phenomenon itself is called, in academic jargon, "(political) transition".

In contrast to everyday language, "political regime" in science is defined as

> the formal and informal organisation of the center of political power, and of its relations with the broader society. A regime determines who has access to political power, and how those who are in power deal with those who are not. (Fishman, 1990, p. 428)[9]

"Systemic change", "change *of* regime" or "transition" (in German: *Systemtransformation* or *Systemwechsel*), all to be used interchangeably, happens when one political regime transitions into another type of regime. The "classic triad" (the three basic types of political rule) consists of democratic, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes.

Note that the direction of systemic change or transition is not determined a priori. While thus, for instance, the breakdown of the Weimar Republic in inter-war Germany constitutes a transition from democracy towards totalitarianism, the case of Spain after the death of General Franco represents a case of transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. "Democratisation", therefore, is defined as the systemic transition from a non-democratic regime to a democratic one. It is important to note that this scientific definition of the term is not congruent with the much sloppier use of the same term in everyday and journalistic language, whereby "democratisation" is often employed to vaguely refer to "anything more liberal".

9 See also Skaaning's very similar effort at defining regimes (Skaaning, 2006, p. 13). Still the best overview of the range of different definitions of "political regime" is in a small paper by Gerardo Munck (1996), the annex of which lists no less than 16 different such definitions.

Box 1: Regime types and their definitions

Although much effort has been spent over the past half-century on defining the three basic types of regimes, some confusion still exists, and therefore some elaboration is needed.

With regard to ***democracy***, the most prominent definition by far is by Robert Dahl (1971, p. 3), who argues that "eight institutional guarantees" must be simultaneously present in order to speak of what he calls "polyarchy", but what in political science is routinely referred to as "democracy". These are (1) freedom to form and join organisations, (2) freedom of expression, (3) right to vote, (4) right of political leaders to compete for support, (5) eligibility for public office, (6) access to alternative sources of information, (7) free and fair elections and (8) institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference.[10] Semantically synonymous, but more elegant because of its greater parsimony, is the effort of Diamond, Linz and Lipset (1988, xvi), who define democracy according to only three instead of eight necessary criteria: (a) "meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organized groups (especially political parties) for all effective positions of government power, at regular intervals and excluding the use of force, (b) a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular and fair elections, such that no major (adult) group is excluded, (c) a level of civil and political liberties – freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to form and join organizations – sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation."

A broad consensus exists when it comes to defining ***authoritarianism***. The largely uncontested standard definition still remains the one from Linz (1964, 1975, p. 264), which has four criteria: (1) limited, non-responsible political pluralism, (2) without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinct mentalities, (3) without extensive nor intensive political mobilisation, except at some points in their development and (4) a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power "within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones". Thus, "as long as we adhere to Linz's definition of an authoritarian regime, we should not be surprised about competition taking place under authoritarianism – as long as it is *limited*" (Schlumberger & Schedler, 2020); limited pluralism was, in Linz's own thought, the most important criterion for identifying authoritarian regimes.

As for ***totalitarian regimes***, the work that is probably best known to a broader audience beyond political science likely remains Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1950). However, due to its rather philosophical nature, this does not lend itself easily to be turned into a checklist for empirical examination on whether or not a certain case falls under this category. A more empirically accessible definition of totalitarianism has been provided by Carl Friedrich and Zbigniev Brzezinski (1956). They established six criteria that together account for, as they claim, "the general characteristics of totalitarian dictatorship": (1) "an elaborate ideology", (2) "a single mass party, typically led by one man", (3) "a system of terror […] effected through party and secret-police control", (4) "a near-complete monopoly of control" of "all means of effective mass communication", (5) an equally "near-complete monopoly of the effective use of all weapons of armed combat", and (6) "a central control and direction of the entire economy through the bureaucratic coordination of formerly independent corporate entities". It remains the most widely used definition in political science to date, with practically no alternatives on the market.

Hybrid regimes, for the sake of completeness, are one way how scholars have tried to illuminate the grey zone between democratic and authoritarian regimes (see e.g. Bogaards, 2009; Diamond, 2002; Gilbert & Mohseni, 2011; Karl, 1995; Krennerich, 1999; Rüb, 2002; Wigell, 2008; Zinecker, 2004). This taxonomic process differs, on a methodological level, from creating either "democracy with adjectives" (Collier & Levitsky, 1997; adjectives include "illiberal", "enclave", "domain", "electoral", delegative", or "semi-") or "authoritarianisms with adjectives" (such as "electoral", "liberalised", "competitive", "liberal", "soft,", "semi-"), but mostly it seeks to cover exactly those regimes that combine *some* features of democracy with *some* features of authoritarianism. *Prima vista*, they thus defy neat categorisation as democracies or authoritarianisms. However, Diamond, arguably the most influential contribution to this debate, starts by observing "the astonishing frequency with which contemporary authoritarian regimes manifest, at least superficially, a number of democratic features" (Diamond, 2002, p. 23) and ultimately subsumes hybrids

10 See also the textbook section on "defining democracy" by Mair (2014, 82f.); for a recent critical discussion, see Blokland (2016, p. 187ff.).

under "the variety of nondemocratic regimes" (Diamond, 2002, p. 23), as the most influential scholars do today (such as Schedler, Levitsky, Way, and others). Today, thus, scholars have come to refer to "hybrid regimes" mostly as subtypes of authoritarian regimes with specifying adjectives. Although the method of constructing "diminished subtypes" can be criticised as such, there is no question in such contributions that these form part of the spectrum of authoritarian regimes. Contributions to the contrary, such as Zinecker's (2004) conceptualisation of "hybrid regimes", not only remain outliers, but are also methodologically flawed (e.g., she redefines the concept of "political regime" in a parochial manner to include civil society, which is at odds with the entire literature on political regimes). Others present interesting discussions on political regimes, but they fail to define the concept they seek to establish ("hybrid regime", e.g., Gilbert & Mohseni, 2011) and therefore miss out on the main methodological requirement of establishing categories. They can therefore be ignored here.

The phenomenon of transition in its turn needs to be differentiated and is both empirically and conceptually distinct from "reform".[11] Reform may or may not have systemic implications but does not necessarily lead to a change of regime. "Transition", by contrast, always refers to the systemic change *of* political regimes, not to change *in* political regimes. The English term "change" does not specify the nature of change. In German, the difference between change *of* regime (or transition) as opposed to change *in* regime (or *non-systemic change*) is brought about in the noun itself. Transition is referred to as "System*wechsel*" whereas the latter (change *in* regime or *non*-systemic change) is referred to as "System*wandel*".

Such processes [of change *within* regime, or "System*wandel*"; author] contribute to "systems maintenance" (Holtmann, 2010, p. 2), whereas transitions imply the "complete exchange […] of fundamental structures and norms, of legal rules and bodies of personnel (functional elites), of career paths and patterns of action in the state, the economy, and in large parts of society." (Holtmann, 2010, p. 2)

It is clear, thus, that we can only speak of a transition if and when these formal and informal rules of the political game (of who gets access to the centre of political power in what ways, and how those in power deal with those who are not, i.e. "the regime") are not only at stake or shaking and *re*-formed, but have been *trans*-formed into a new set of rules that determine who has access to positions of power, and about the rules of how such power is exerted. In other words: "Democratization is the process of transitioning from some other type of political system type – nearly always a dictatorship – to one that is democratic in nature" (Frantz, 2018, p. 134). Hence, the concept of transition always refers to the macro-political process of fundamental changes of the overall *polity*, as opposed to changes – minor or major – in certain policy areas.

It follows, by definition, that previous elites who ruled in a non-democratic polity must cede power – at the very least the power to determine who has access to power. De facto and as a consequence of the last point, in transitions to democracy, previously incumbent elites ultimately lose their positions of power as a rule of thumb. Thus, transitions come with a large-scale change of political personnel in "positions of *effective* government power" (Diamond, Linz & Lipset, 1988, xvi) that, apart from the dictator himself, usually also

11 Also note that "reform" as a concept is generally *re*-active in nature, not pro-active. In autocracies, reform is usually sought when incumbent ruling elites are forced to re-act to domestic and/or international pressures.

involves those in the most powerful positions around him.[12] Note, however, that some exchange of elite personnel may also occur without transition, whereas transitions tend to involve a change of the *top* political decision-maker(s). Democratic regimes are even characterised by the frequent exchange of leading political personnel, including the most important power-holders, while the regime itself remains the same (democratic).

Yet, within the family of autocracies, neopatrimonial regimes[13] (such as those that prevail in the MENA region) are particularly notorious for elite rotations and elite reshufflings. The reason is that the personalist leader cannot allow for alternative power centres to emerge next to him; one way of accomplishing this is by moving and re-moving elites frequently from one post to another, and in-and-out of the "politically relevant elites" (Perthes, 2004; Schlumberger & Bank, 2002). This prevents powerful individual elites from building up networks of their own, which could turn against the ruler.

On the other hand, we may see a slow erosion of democracy with little or no exchange in power-holding personnel, but at the point of democratic breakdown, elites other than those who ruled under the previous democratic regime will take over power in a then newly institutionalised/institutionalising non-democratic regime.

Ever since the 1986 publication of the massive four-volume work on "transitions from authoritarian rule" by O'Donnell and Schmitter, there is a broad consensus that the process of political transitions can analytically be split into three distinct phases: liberalisation, democratisation in a narrower sense and, finally, consolidation. These can (and often do) overlap in practice, and they have tended to vary, in length and degree of overlap, to a great extent in past instances of systemic change.

(Political) liberalisation (respectively de-liberalisation) is defined as "any change in a political system that makes the politics [not the *polity* though!; author] of that system more [respectively less] participatory and/or competitive" (Conroy-Krutz & Frantz, 2017, p. 6). Liberalisation represents the effort of an incumbent authoritarian regime to ease social control over the population and comes as "a modification of the authoritarian regime in which the leeway for social and oppositional actors *outside* the regime broadens" (Schlumberger & Karadag, 2006, p. 237). However, this also means that *liberalisation does not alter existing power constellations* nor the distribution of power, *nor* it does bring about inclusive political *decision*-making (see Bos, 1994, p. 85). Thus, liberalisation may or may not signal the start of a transition because, as a matter of principle, and as many historical instances demonstrate, political liberalisation is a reversible process. Even though there are instances in which liberalisation has led to dynamics that subsequently triggered further-reaching changes to the political order as such,[14] "it is dangerous to conflate democratization and political

12 Likely the only notable exception might be King Juan Carlos of Spain after the death of General Franco; he oversaw a transition to democracy in Spain, having been nominated Franco's designated successor. In that case, however, circumstances were arguably special, as the dictator's death widened the room for manoeuvre for the Spanish king.

13 For an overview and definitions, see Eisenstadt (1973), Erdmann and Engel (2007), Pawelka (1985, pp. 22-29), Theobald (1982), and many others.

14 On this special instance in which liberalisation leads to democratisation, see Section 2.4 below.

liberalization because many reforms often considered to be signs of political liberalization are actually associated with greater authoritarian regime survival" (Frantz, 2018, p. 137), and thus they have the opposite effect of what observers erroneously ascribe to it.

Democratisation (or conversely authoritarianisation) in the narrow sense of the term, is the distinct second phase[15] within a process of transition. Democratisation, as a transition to democracy, always includes two aspects: first, the exit from power of an *ancien regime*; second, the institutionalisation of a democratic regime with institutions that guarantee open political competition where the "limited, non-responsive pluralism" (Linz, 1975, p. 264) evolves into unrestrained pluralism. "It is useful to focus separately on the two different aspects of democratization: extrication from the authoritarian regime and the constitution of a democratic one" (Przeworski, 1991, p. 67). It is for that reason that simply labelling this second phase "institutionalisation", as Merkel (2010a, p. 105ff.) does, can be misleading insofar as it tends to make readers forget that, before the installation of new democratic institutions, the qualitatively different – and much more difficult – step of old regime elites actually ceding power must, by definition, have taken place before a transition to democracy can follow. Otherwise, transition cannot proceed. Democratisation in this narrow sense as a second phase in the overall systemic transition ends for some with the first proto-democratic elections, for others "when a new democratic constitution is endorsed and authoritatively sets the norm for political contestation and political decision-making procedures" (Merkel, 2010a, p. 105).

The third phase is the consolidation of a new regime. Suggestions as to how to define "consolidated" vary from Huntington's (1968) simple "two-turnover-test" to Merkel's "embedded democracy", with little consensus in sight apart from a general agreement that consolidation refers to a complex and multi-layered process. A related question is when we ask O'Donnell and Schmitter's (1986) question as to whether or not there is a "point of no return" to autocracy. As we had to learn, such a point likely does not exist, which renders the search for an agreed-upon definition of democratic consolidation yet more complicated. But as there are no cases in the MENA region of even half-way consolidated democracies, independently of how we define consolidation, it is not conducive to the purposes of this paper to elaborate more on democratic consolidation at this point.

It is of utmost importance, therefore, to not confuse "political liberalisation" with "democratisation", as these concepts are by no means congruent. Likewise, "pluralism" is not a sign of "democracy", nor is it synonymous to it. While unrestricted pluralism is indeed a trait of democracies, pluralism *per se* is not a sign of "democraticness" unless it is, at least in principle, *unlimited*.

15 The third phase is the *consolidation* of a new regime, but it is beyond the scope of the present paper to discuss consolidation in depth. For the purpose of assessing political regime developments in the MENA region, consolidation remains a negligible category since the concept can only be reasonably discussed with respect to existing democratic regimes (of which there are not many in this world region). The two core questions the present paper addresses – to repeat what has been laid out in the introduction – are *not* whether democracies are consolidating or not, but whether (a) it is possible to detect existing democracies in the Arab world today, and (b) non-democracies are more likely to democratise (as defined above) as a result of the post-Arab uprising reformism, which several leaders have engaged in over the past decades. For the interested reader, important contributions to the literature on consolidation can be found, among many others, in O'Donnell's "Illusions about Consolidation" (1996) or Merkel's concept of "Embedded Democracy" (2004).

Restricted or "limited pluralism", by contrast, is a core defining feature of authoritarian regimes, according to Linz's definition discussed above, and according to Linz's own view of the most important element in our standard definition of authoritarian regimes. It is precisely the sloppy usage of these core concepts in journalistic, policy-related and also in some academic work that has been the main cause of so much confusion in the empirical assessment of political regimes over the past decades. For that reason, the definitions introduced in this section need to be born in mind for the remainder of this paper, as they will be crucial for a later assessment of the status quo of existing polities regarding the type of their political regime.

Part I

Theories of democratisation

The following Sections 3 and 4 aim to review theoretical approaches by which scholars, over the past decades, have tried to explain the occurrence of political transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy ("democratisation"). Whereas Section 3 reviews all major approaches, Section 4 distils from that the core variables, along with a number of questions that can guide the empirical analysis of transition processes to find out why such systemic change happened in a given case. In order not to generate false expectations, it needs to be noted that, for the empirical analysis of political change in the MENA region, possibilities of a direct application of these theoretical approaches have remain very limited up to now. This is because instances of democratisation in that region still are the exception rather than the rule. Yet, such exceptions do exist (more in Section 7.4 below), and they deserve a sound explanation all the more precisely *because* they constitute the exception. Second, when asking about the likelihood of systemic change, the potential causes for transition must be known because otherwise we are much more likely to take instances of non-democratisation for what they are not (democratisation), or to wrongly attribute causality to factors that are non-causal.

3 Theories of systemic change ("*transitology*")

As laid out in the introduction, logically speaking, there is no other way to find out than to take a look at what *causes* such processes, if the goal is to assess the likelihood of systemic transitions to democracy.[16] Any empirical observation must then be checked with a view to the presence or absence of such factors.[17] The field of transitological theory is, however, characterised by the simultaneous presence of multiple and competing explanations of democratisation that attribute causes to a large variety of factors (or hypothesised independent variables). Accordingly, and differently from "paradigms" in the natural sciences (Kuhn, 1962), there is no consensus about what causes democratisation. Therefore,

16 An independent variable (IV), or a combination of such IVs, in science, is the factor that either always causes the so-called dependent variable (DV) or makes it, if present, more likely to appear. If the IV causes the DV under all conditions, we speak of a universal law; if it causes it only sometimes, we speak of a probabilistic law. When the aim is to assess the probability with which a certain dependent variable (here: systemic change of the political regime) will occur, the *only* possibility to find out is thus by looking at those variables that cause this DV. Sadly, in all sciences, we often do not exactly know which IV causes what DV. Second, mono-causality is a very rare thing to happen in nature, that is, in the empirical sciences (natural and social sciences). Mostly, more than one variables is at work to cause a certain outcome. Third, and to make things yet more complicated: We often do not even know how many IVs are at work, nor in which relative weight they interact together to produce the outcome to be explained. And to turn the screw of science yet further: Sometimes there are circumstances (or, in academic language, conditions) under which different (combinations of) IVs can, independently of one another, produce one and the same outcome (equifinality). Yet, however complicated the process of finding knowledge is, as long as we follow the scientific method, no deviation from the process of "doing science" is possible, unless we wish to embark on other ways of gaining knowledge, such as meditation, religious belief or the like (see King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994, ch. 1).

17 Note that this will still not provide an answer to the question of likelihood because it does not answer the unresolved question of which factors bear more relative weight than others in explaining democratic transitions in what contexts and under what domestic and external conditions. Plus, apart from the multiplicity of theoretical approaches, there are not only factors that trigger democratisation, but also factors that pre-empt such processes, some of which are dealt with in Part II below. Both sides of the coin need to be taken into account in order to make informed speculations about the likelihood of transitions.

to achieve the aim of assessing the likelihood of systemic political transitions to democracy requires a review of the entirety of approaches that suggest different causal variables as the main ones responsible for systemic change. An abridged overview of such approaches is provided below (Sections 3.1 through 3.5).

This seems all the more necessary as many in the policy community remain unfamiliar with the definitions of pertinent concepts in research, are thus unaware of their meaning outside everyday language usage, and continue to work with notions and ideas – when operating in the field of political reform – that have continuously appalled scholars as ill-conceived. To give but one example, Crawford (2001, p. 74), examining a range of policy documents, finds that practitioners "define" basic concepts such as "democracy" through "ad-hoc lists of various elements of democracy, differing between donors in their comprehensiveness and in overall coherence", and also finds that "inconsistency in donor interpretation" is "at its worst with regard to good governance, attributed with widely differing meanings and […] used loosely and in an undefined manner".

In order to avoid such pitfalls, it is therefore necessary to know those variables that have been hypothesised as causing democratisation and as impacting on processes of systemic change. This research remains insofar little satisfying, as no single variable can be said to occur in all cases, nor can any of the suggested variables be said to be absent in all cases. What is more, there is no established insight as to which factors are prevalent in what regions, contexts or time periods as opposed to others, nor what their relative weight is. In fact, different variables have been found to take on different weights in explaining individual cases. The conclusion from this frustrating insight is that, in trying to explain political transitions, we need to look at them through a lens that synthesises theories and their findings rather than taking one isolated approach (see Merkel, 1994). Yet, research has also demonstrated that individual case studies do not allow us to conclude from the importance of one variable in one case on its relevance in others. It follows that we still need to *know* the range of potentially relevant explanatory variables in order to be able to examine them and their respective interplay in each individual case.

In order to structure the field, it has become common practice in textbooks to sort individual approaches as to the four levels of analysis on which they detect the core variables they hold responsible for causing transition: the macro-level of long-term, overarching factors; the meso-level of large societal transformations and large collective actors (such as classes and their changing constellations towards each other); the micro-level of smaller actors (such as ruling elites, organised regime opposition, down to the individual actor); and the international level (external influences – from the ousting of a regime through military intervention to democracy assistance and unintended effects through the regular interaction of societies).

3.1 Theories of transition: Macro-political approaches

Modernisation theories[18] have it that "the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy," as Seymour Lipset (1959, p. 75) wrote in a seminal article. "Well-to-do", of course, needs specification, as it is too vague to be operationalised. More specifically, key importance was attributed to economic modernisation, rising wage levels and subsequently rising educational standards, which would, in turn, allow for a wealthy middle class to emerge. This middle class, according to Lipset and others, would develop claims towards more self-reliance and responsibility economically, but also form civic associations, and thus develop participatory demands.

Today, it is recognised that modernisation, encompassing as it may be, does not in itself produce democracy. To be sure, there is a robust and obvious statistical correlation between economic wealth and democracy (see Przeworski & Limongi, 1997) – which has made modernisation theoretical arguments a particularly stubborn die-hard in popular arguments, to the extent that popular belief in its hypothesised causality has, at times, almost become religious. But first, simple statistical correlations do not tell us much about the direction of the causal arrow. More recent studies find a "democratic dividend" (cf. Faust, 2007, as well as various followers), that is, economic benefits from democracy rather than democratic benefits of economic development. However, it remains unclear about whether causality is present at all, or whether both democracy and economic development depend on third factors. Second, although the claimed causal chain from industrialisation to democracy is supported empirically by a static correlation between both, it has shown to not hold true in a dynamic perspective (see Rustow, 1970). Thus, although economic development *can* be conducive to the emergence of democracy, it need not be so.[19] More recent empirical investigations indicate that causality might actually run the other way around: Sustainable economic and social development has also been found to be the product of democratic governance (Baum & Lake, 2003; Faust, 2007; Lake & Baum, 2001; Sen, 1999a, 1999b).

18 The term should be used in the plural, as it refers to a family of theoretical approaches that have been popular from, roughly, the 1940s through the 1960s in economics (key author: Walt Rostow), political science (key author: Seymour Lipset) and sociology (key author: Talcott Parsons). They all share the idea that an encompassing process of socio-economic modernisation will, sooner or later, set in everywhere. This process is thought to range from a transformation of economic structures (from subsistence agriculture into an age of mass industrial production) to a transformation of information and communication systems (at the time: mass access to telephone and, later, television) and to the transformation of culture and values (from "primordial", ascriptive identities to meritocracy and to an allegiance to institutions rather than to tribe and kinship).

19 Critics have denounced, inter alia, the naïve determinism of this view on development as a one-way street, as well as the Eurocentric imagination of the traditional industrial nations having progressed on a path that other countries would have to "catch up" with as they were still more "backward". Moreover, there are too many counter-examples of (a) cases where such processes had been taking place, but democracy remained absent (e.g., Singapore, the Arab Gulf countries); (b) cases where democracy developed despite lacking socio-economic prerequisites (classically, e.g., India; see Banerjee, 2012); and (c) cases that could not be explained (such as, e.g., France's sustaining democracy at a time when Germany's first democracy collapsed. Both countries were then on a par as regards those indicators that modernisation theory claims to be the core causal variables). All of that proved the claimed deterministic causality to be wrong.

Systems theories and the theorem of structural functionalism are closely related to American sociologist Talcott Parsons, who, in the 1960s and during the heyday of the Cold War, spectacularly predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union. All forms of human association, he claimed, would over time develop certain "evolutionary universals of society" (thus the title of his most famous article of 1964) (Parsons, 1964). If they failed to do so, they would falter and become extinct. This biologistic view, typical of the time and "behavioural turn in the social sciences", contended that – apart from social hierarchies, systems of belief or religions, and monetary exchange – democracy would have to be developed by societies in order to survive over time. Societies would become ever more complex and differentiate accordingly, as they would have to fulfil an ever-growing set of functions. Various "sub-systems" (the societal sub-system, the economic sub-system, the political system) were seen as necessary for complex human associations to cope with an ever-increasing amount of functional and dysfunctional stress to these systems, and each partial system would have to be able to act autonomously and not be dominated by another. In the Soviet Union, Parsons claimed, the economic system was subdued – in the rationale of central planning – to the dictates of the political system and would therefore, in the long run, have to collapse because functional differentiation was prohibited in central planning. Democracy was here seen as the culminating point of human development. German sociologist Niklas Luhmann built on Parsons ideas but went even further. In his view, the sole purpose of social (as well as other) systems consists of the permanent process of self-reproduction (*autopoiesis*). In modern societies, in the context of an increasingly complex interplay between partial systems that each assume certain functions for the overall system, each partial system develops specific "codes" for itself. As a consequence, therefore, "no functional system can […] jump in for another; none can substitute for another nor even disburden it" (Luhmann, 1986, p. 207; author's translation). If functional differentiation was repressed, that would lead to losses in efficiency, with subsequent losses in legitimacy – and thus, over time, to a threat to stability.

Yet, systems theoretical approaches (see also Sandschneider, 1994) tend to describe the state of affairs in modern democratic societies more than they actually explain the *emergence* of democracy. As in modernisation theoretical approaches to the study of transition, there is a high degree of determinism involved in this argument: If a society had developed all its autonomous sub- or partial functional systems, it would necessarily have become democratic – if it failed to do so, it would collapse. Adherents of such approaches will look at the interplay of the political and economic systems in a complex socio-economic fabric on a macro-level of analysis, and from there try to predict the likelihood of systemic change towards democracy (or of collapse).

Culturalist approaches have in common that, like the theories discussed above, they hold the variables on the macro-analytical level responsible for the presence or absence of democracy, but they see them as being rooted not in degrees of technological or societal modernisation or societal development, but rather in societal traits determined and/or shaped by culture. Although such approaches do not enjoy much support in the academic world because they all suffer from logical, conceptual and empirical flaws, two main strands of approaches need to be distinguished.

a) "Readiness" of (specific) cultures for democracy: The core claim here is that certain cultures or "civilisations" are more likely to develop democratic systems of governance than others. For these "others", democratisation is seen as being excluded a priori because of primary traits that are believed to be embedded in the cultures of certain world region or

"civilisation", which Huntington draws on a global map according to "fault lines" of civilisational conflict. Depending on the time of writing, cultures Huntington claimed to be democracy-averse have included Catholicism (as prevalent in Latin America), Confucianism (China and parts of Asia) and Islam (the MENA and parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa). Within such civilisations, religion is viewed as the most important feature: "Even more than ethnicity, religion discriminates sharply and exclusively among people" (Huntington, 1993, p. 27). Pushed by its main proponent, Samuel Huntington (1984, 1991, 1993, 1996), but with quite some xenophobic resonance among popular to populist authors, the popularity of this approach reached its peak in academia over twenty years ago. In Muslim societies in particular, Lewis writes, the "dominant political tradition has long been that of command and obedience, and far from weakening it, modern times have actually witnessed its intensification" (Lewis, 1996, p 54f.).

Towards the end of the century, then, Przeworski and Limongi (1998) set out to test empirically whether such types of civilisations actually correlate with democracy, and their answer was positive. However, their study rested on an extremely crude categorisation of only three "civilisations" (Protestant, Catholic and Muslim), so critiques did not take long to emerge: "The evidence offered by the Przeworski study is of little or no utility in examining the impact of culture on democracy" (Seligson, 2000). Even Huntington himself had been misled, earlier, into predictions that soon after he made them turned out to be grossly false, when he thought that democracy in Latin American was highly unlikely to emerge because of the dominance of Catholicism there (see Huntington, 1984).

The idea that "Islamic and Confucian cultures pose insuperable obstacles to democratic development" (Huntington, 1991 p. 310) must thus be characterised as flawed on all three levels: conceptual, operationalisational and empirical.[20]

This approach, which relies on ascriptive primary traits of entire civilisations, is to be distinguished, however, from approaches such as those of Stepan and Robertson (2003, p. 42), which claim that "Arab political culture […] helps to sustain political exceptionalism". The claim here is about political culture, which is operationalised differently from Huntington's "civilisations", in that it refers to factors that are not innate, but rather acquired through socialisation, education and the like, some aspects of which are heavily shaped by incumbent regimes themselves. Accordingly, these authors find "an 'Arab' more than a 'Muslim' gap of democracy". At any rate, for the MENA region at large, Huntington's theses have repeatedly and categorically been rejected as an explanatory factor for the absence of democracy.

b) Social capital approaches: In a nutshell, this approach builds on the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville *On Democracy in America* (1835/40, Vol. III, 2nd part) and argues that "the more social capital has been accumulated in a society, the more likely – *ceteris paribus* – autocracies can be expected to not survive" (Merkel & Puhle, 1999, p. 44). The core of this approach can be summed up in very few words: "Relationships make a difference" (Field,

20 For a more detailed and in-depth critique of the individual hypotheses, and for a refutation of the arguments, see Bromley (1994) and Schlumberger (2001). For an overview of counter-arguments, see Schlumberger and Karadag (2006, pp. 231-233).

2017, p. 1). Social capital means formal but also informal intra-societal relationships, which are assumed to act as a sort of social glue and contribute to stabilisation of the community. The voluntary association of citizens is seen here as particularly conducive to the internalisation of democratic practices, to "*making democracy work*," as Robert Putnam found in a seminal 1993 study on Italy,[21] which closely followed the argument Tocqueville had made 150 years earlier about American voluntary associational life, and which, in a then much debated retake on Tocqueville's observations, he portrayed as being on the decline in the United States (US) nowadays (Putnam, 1995, 2000). In Putnam's view, thus, social capital "is good for us" (Putnam, 2000, p. 414).

The core insight is that democracy depends on a democratic civic culture, which means that participatory mechanisms must be cultivated in civil society in order to firmly establish democratic norms and attitudes in any given society. Voluntary and participatory behaviour is thus seen as key for this. Excessive individualism, by contrast, is viewed as counter-productive. The key to democratisation is hence to be found in the emergence and establishment of democratic values in a society.

Although this may be correct, there are two great challenges to that strand of thinking: First, causality remains dubious. The approach ends in a cul-de-sac when it comes to the hen-and-egg question of whether such forms of social capital are actually a cause or a symptom of democratic association. Second, naïve adoptions of Putnam's and others' examinations of social capital ignore the fact that "a given form of social capital that is valuable in facilitating certain actions may be useless or even harmful for others" (Coleman, 1994, p. 302). This means that there may very well be a large amount of social capital that can be accumulated among certain privileged groups in a society, but this does not per se signal "democraticness". In other words: "Social relationships can sometimes serve to exclude and deny as well as include and enable" (Field, 2003, p. 3[22]). In autocracies in particular, there are arguably groups among which elite circles in particular have managed to amass a very high degree of "social capital". But this is used to maintain exclusive (and often unlawful) privileges as well as to help autocracy survive rather than make a contribution towards a more pluralist political development. There is, thus, a severe logical flaw in social capital approaches that aim at generating law-like inferences on the conduciveness of social capital for democracy or democratisation.

3.2 Theories of transition: Meso-political approaches

From structuralism and power resources to inequality

This approach starts by historically examining how democracy came about in Europe as a process of the transformation from feudal absolute monarchism to modern types of political rule. Barrington Moore (1966) claimed, in his now classical book, that for European powers, only one of three pathways into modernity – the bourgeois revolution – had actually led to democracy (in the United States, United Kingdom and France), whereas the others ended in

21 The follow-up book on the United States seven years later, as well as a 1995 article on which the book builds, were both tellingly entitled "Bowling Alone" (Putnam, 1995, 2000).

22 See also ch. 3 of Field's revised 3rd edition of 2017, entitled *A Walk on the Dark Side*.

fascism ("revolution from above", e.g., Germany, Italy) and communism ("revolution from below", e.g., Soviet Union), respectively. The explanation, for him, is that democracy can only develop if the peasantry is relatively small and no longer dependent on a landed nobility or agrarian capitalists, and if, within the upper segment of the bourgeoisie, a transformation has taken place away from agrarian capital to trade and industrial capital. In that way, the modernised bourgeoisie would be the challengers of the alliance between crown and nobility and demand an expansion of participation in political life. For Moore, thus, the matter was clear: "no bourgeoisie, no democracy" (Moore, 1966, p. 418).

Moore's hypothesis about the major role of large collective actors such as social classes as driving forces in processes of democratisation is, in principle, supported by Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992). However, no agreement exists today as to *who* exactly these driving forces really are.

Rueschemeyer and his co-authors agree with Moore that large-scale landed property was detrimental to the development of democracy, but insist that Moore was mistaken in his analysis about the role of the bourgeoisie. By contrast, for these authors, the working classes are the actors who really push for democratisation because the bourgeoisie will, depending on their own interests, side either (a) with large-scale agrarian property owners, or (b) with the repressive state and turn into its ally, or (c) it will prevent the expansion of participatory rights. Democracy, according to their "relative class power model of democratization", results from the effective integration of the working class into the political process (Rueschemeyer et al., 1992, p. 47). Only if the working class manages to organise autonomously and forge alliances with other previously excluded social groups (the skilled crafts and small trade, the petty bourgeoisie and other wage-earning employees) can democracy emerge, and even then it depends on a range of further conditions.[23] In sum, the claim is that the question of what social classes gain and/or hold power determines whether or not democracy emerges.

Following this general proposition about classes and their relative power in a society, Vanhanen (1990, 1997) claimed "that there is and there must be a common factor able to account for the major part of the variation of political systems from the aspect of democratization" (Vanhanen, 1990, p. 47). He hypothesises that it was not only large social classes whose relative power vis-à-vis one another was decisive for democracy's birth, but that democracy depended on the general distribution of what he called "power resources". Therefore, examining the relative distribution of power resources within a society would lead us automatically to knowing more about the likelihood by which that society might be ruled democratically.[24] He tries to demonstrate the statistical connection between the degree to which, according to his rather complex "index of power resources" (IPR), such power

23 For instance, the degree of state autonomy, in their analysis, needs not be too high (for, in that case, the state would exclude all social groups from power) nor too low (because then the state would become a mere prey to the interests of too powerful dominant groups in society) (Rueschemeyer et al., 1992, p. 66).

24 Such power resources for him consisted of economic resources (size of the rural population; landed property; decentralisation) and educational resources (literacy rates; students in tertiary education as share of the overall population), and their distribution could be measured by their professional distribution (degree of urbanisation; non-agricultural workers' share in the overall workforce and overall population).

resources are dispersed within a society (assumed independent variable), and the probability of a democratic regime or the "degree of democratisation" of a country.

Vanhanen succeeds in demonstrating his power dispersion – democracy nexus in a clear manner for the traditional Western democracies. The pattern is: *The more broadly the power resources in a society are dispersed, the higher the degree of democratisation in that country*. But for the middle range of power resources distribution, no clear relations exist; such countries can be either democratic or autocratic, so no deterministic relationship can be established. The second problem with this approach is the question whether he does not get trapped in a tautology: When power resources are distributed equitably, it might be that this is a sign rather than a cause of democracy, meaning that he might "explain" democracy by its own characteristics rather than through the causes of its emergence. Third, parts of his IPR measure things by numbers rather than by substance, which cannot adequately be measured the way he operationalises the indicators. For instance, the mere number of students enrolled in tertiary education says nothing about the quality of that education, and as is known today, education is one of the prime variables where the quantity is less relevant than its quality. Fourth, due to its long-term perspective, structuralist approaches are hardly able to explain cases in which transitions came about suddenly within a short span of time in which changes of class structures cannot be the cause for democratisation because they only change slowly over decades. Thus, the point of transition cannot be explained through macro-theoretical, long-term variables without knowing thresholds.

Yet again, more recent studies have repeatedly found that large-scale socio-economic inequality is, in fact, inversely related with democracy and participatory institutions (see, i.a., Savoia, Easaw, & McKay, 2010), even though the causal mechanisms have not been identified well-enough yet. Inequality is today seen as a risk for established democracies: "The higher the inequality, the more likely we are to move away from democracy," write economists such as Milanovic (2017; see also Tilly, 2003). Moreover, it is considered a factor that can effectively forestall democratisation (see, i.a., Ziblatt, 2011). Looked at from an opposite direction, the "diminution of categorical inequalities within the subject population and/or increasing insulation of public politics from existing categorical inequalities, all other things being equal, democratizes regimes" (Tilly, 2003, p. 41).[25]

3.3 Theories of transition: Micro-political approaches

a) Inductive-empirical actor-centred approaches have reviewed democratisation processes as they happened empirically, with a focus mainly on southern Europe in the 1970s (the cases of Greece, Spain and Portugal in the 1970s) and in Latin America in the 1980s. They aim, primarily through analytical induction, at carving out factors that are prominent in explaining transitions to democracy on the *actors'* level rather than on structural grounds, and thereby represent a departure from previous approaches. Inspired by their desire to help oppositional movements in Latin America gain ground, the authors criticised that structural factors alone are not enough to explain democratic outcomes, nor do they lend themselves easily to producing practical policy advice to democrats: It was found not only difficult but wrong to tell an oppositionist in, say, Brazil, that he would have to wait another 50 or 100 years because

25 See also, for a more economically grounded argument, Piketty (2014, Part III, Ch. 11, in particular).

the country's socio-economic modernisation had just not progressed enough to allow for democracy. On this basis, actors gained more focus in the analyses of a group of scholars headed by Philippe Schmitter and Guillermo O'Donnell. During their research, these scholars witnessed the quasi-collective democratisation of the Latin American continent, and later of Eastern Europe, from authoritarianism to democracy. Collective actors such as churches in Poland and social movements in East Germany and Chile gained attention, as did the processes by which authoritarian incumbents were finally extricated from office.

One of the core insights was that "pacted transitions", in which oppositional and regime elites negotiate the transition, stand greater chances of reaching democratic consolidation than ones that come about violently or by *ruptura* (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Karl & Schmitter, 1991). Several cases support this hypothesis (prominent are i.a. Chile, Brazil, Poland), but too little evidence exists to turn this hypothesis into a general rule or pattern. In general, the number of cases in which democratisation was not only successful *but also* resulted in a subsequent consolidation of democracy is not too high, meaning that a small-n problem remains and probabilities cannot be calculated in any reasonable manner.

However, the above-cited analytical (and, of course, artificial) splitting up of the overall transition process into the three distinct phases of liberalisation, democratisation (in a narrow sense of the term) and consolidation (see first: O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986, p. 7) is an achievement of this strand of literature, which in the meantime has gained general recognition, and on the usefulness of which there is a very broad consensus today.

b) Deductive actor-centred approaches are closely related to (and originated in parallel with) the more inductive strand of actor-centred theory; they also focus on transition processes in southern Europe, Latin America and Central Eastern Europe. In contrast to the inductive strand presented above, however, they strive at establishing ideal-typical evolutions of how the process of transition unfolds through game-theoretical modelling of transitions.

The most important innovation in this regard was Przeworski's conceptualisation of elite-opposition constellations, which are assumed to lead to democratic outcomes. He starts with the assumption that everything starts with "divisions in the authoritarian regime" (Przeworski, 1991, p. 56). This is because "liberalisers" or "softliners" within the regime aim at "broadening the social base of the regime" (Przeworski, 1991, p. 57), thereby strengthening their own positions *within* the regime vis-à-vis "hardliners". If they manage to convince the hardliners of the benefit of such an opening, this will, in Przeworski's view, lead to popular mobilisation within civil society; formerly closed avenues of aggregating interests are opened through the regime's deliberate decision to politically liberalise, and such liberalisation is "invariably intended as controlled openings of political space" (Przeworski, 1991, p. 57).[26] Only one of the ensuing pathways[27] leads to democracy. Josep

26 This means that liberalisation always aims at an enhancement, not at the demise of authoritarianism. "Thus, liberalization is referred to as an 'opening' (*apertura*), 'decompression' (*distensão*), 'renewal' (*odnowa*), or reconstruction (*perestroika* – 'remodeling', as of a house). These are terms with strong connotations of limits to reform" (Przeworski, 1991, p. 58).

27 These are: (1) "*status-quo dictatorship*" (in case the hardliners dominate and prevent softliners from liberalising); (2) "*broadened dictatorship*" (in case softliners manage to liberalise and those parts of civil

Colomer agrees with the notion that various possible outcomes can result from such regime-opposition constellations. He goes on to model such constellations in a much more nuanced and fine-grained fashion than Przeworski, using first the case of the Spanish transition to democracy as an example, but then generalising further (Colomer, 1995, 2000).

While such actor-oriented approaches became the mainstream of transitological literature in the course of the 1990s, concerns have been raised against such rational-choice-based modelling. Among the most prominent voices is Alfred Stepan, who in the late 1990s fundamentally questioned the explanatory value of actor-centred approaches as well as their capacity of allowing for useful generalisations. His main point was that democracy was an extremely unlikely outcome, as it depended on at least a double misperception that actors must have of their respective opponents' intent in order for the ideal-typical process, as depicted by Przeworski, to lead to democratic results.[28] Rather, Stepan argued, it was wrong to assume democratisation would occur "by default" without any actors actually holding pro-democratic attitudes and consciously fighting for that type of system (see Stepan, 1997).

3.4 Theories of transition: International factors

a) Diffusion and contagion, linkage and leverage

With the exception of less than a handful of precursors (e.g. Whitehead, 1986), transitology has researched into international factors in democratisation only since roughly 20 years ago. After the experience of southern Europe's, Latin America's and, finally, Eastern Europe's dominoes of democratisation, scholars suspected that democracy was somehow "contagious", and that it could thus be spread, just like a disease, by contagion. In fact, it was found that, statistically, "diffusion is no illusion" (Brinks & Coppedge, 2006; cf. Gleditsch & Ward, 2006).

society whom liberalisation aims at agree to have themselves incorporated into authoritarian institutions); (3) "*narrowed dictatorship*" (if liberalisation takes place, civil society refuses to be coopted, and hardliners subsequently gain the upper hand and manage, usually through heightened levels of repression, to close the public sphere again); (4) "*insurrection*" (in case everything proceeds as in path (3), but the regime does not manage to re-close the public space); or (5) "*transition*" (when liberalisation takes place, but softliners change their order of preferences along the process and, when it comes to the regime being threatened with a loss of power due to changed preferences, view transition as a more desirable outcome than a narrowed dictatorship or insurrection; see Przeworski (1991, Ch. 2)). To arrive at path (5), which is the only one in which democratisation can occur, thus requires that authoritarian softliners within the regime turn into democratisers while the process of liberalisation is running and have turned so when liberalisation can no longer continue because of the strength the opposition has gained in the meantime. At the same time, this outcome requires the moderate opposition to dominate or neutralise the radical opposition because the latter will voice demands that softliners as regime forces are unable to accept. It also requires softliners to dominate or neutralise hardliners not only at the outset of liberalisation (in the question of whether or not to liberalise), but also at the point when a decision needs to be taken about whether or not to continue the process and then turn it into transition, or whether to clamp down on civil society and try to rescue the regime in a narrowed fashion.

28 As Przeworski admits when he asks: "How then can the process ever arrive at transition? I see two possible ways, both relying on someone's mistaken assumptions" (Przeworski, 1991, p. 62).

The observation was that, statistically, democratisation is more likely to occur in autocratic "islands" within an otherwise already democratic neighbourhood, and that democratisation has tended to appear in clusters rather than in isolated singular instances (which implicitly seems to support Huntington's earlier finding that democratisation occurs in so-called waves). On the one hand, this is not surprising at all since we would intuitively assume that a complex matter such as regime type would not transfer easily from, say, Mongolia to Mali. On the other hand, the problem was that *if* democracy spread by "*contagion*" (Whitehead, 2001; see Schlumberger & Karadag, 2006, p. 238ff.), it still remained unclear what exactly carried the "virus"; the causal mechanism of such contagion remained equally unknown.[29] What is clear though is that over the past three decades, the available means and technical tools to produce internationalisation and, indeed, globalisation have increased exponentially.

Levitsky and Way (2005, 2006) famously suggest that it is a combination of linkage and leverage that makes democracy spread across borders: When linkage (i.e. the density of interactions and the level of exchange of goods, people and ideas between two countries) is high and, at the same time, the democratic country can exert a high degree of leverage (ability to exert pro-democratic pressure from the outside) over the non-democracy, democratisation is more likely to occur than if that is not the case. This idea corresponds to the two dimensions of "control" and "consent" that Whitehead (2001) named earlier: "Control" (or, in the extreme case: imposition) of democracy from abroad can account for the speed, direction and mechanisms of transmission and is, historically, to be located in the early phase of the Cold War.[30] "Consent," by contrast, hints to the recognition, emulation and adoption of democratic norms by populations and their elites outside the democratic centres that are thought to influence third countries, and it has, again historically, been closely associated with the phase of the European Union's enlargement policies in the early 2000s. The linkage-leverage argument has recently received an important critique and arguably a refinement by Tolstrup (2011). He contends that the structural factors of "linkage" are filtered through actor-related conditions by what he calls "gate-keeping elites". These elites can actively either facilitate or constrain such ties to external actors, the existence of which the linkage theorem presupposes, not least through policies geared towards regulating cyberspace.

Thus, scholars assume that there are unintended factors of influence from abroad that can play a role conducive to democratisation, but empirical evidence does not support the assumption that this alone (in the absence of external pressure and a willingness of incumbent elites to democratise) is enough to trigger a change of regime. Democratisation is more likely to occur when external linkages and leverage are both high. Furthermore, the

29 While from today's perspective, we would be quick to assume that processes of globalisation and the spread of new information and communication technologies associated with the advent of the internet and the much greater density and lower costs of interactions between both elites and ordinary citizens might be responsible for processes of contagion or diffusion, this explanation does not explain why, then, democratisation has occurred in global waves long before these technologies had been available. It is, however, not the place here to engage in deeper debates around this question.

30 This is when the United States established democratic regimes in countries such as Germany and Japan for geostrategic reasons in order to contain communism, which they did in combination with military integration (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and economic support schemes (Marshall Plan).

capacity of the European Union (EU) to successfully promote its own norms into the outside world is no longer assumed when membership is not an option (Schimmelfennig, 2007; Smith, 2005; Youngs, 2001, 2009, 2010).[31] Worse yet, "detailed evidence does not sustain such a claim," but rather finds that the EU has been "actively reticent to foster democratic change" (Youngs, 2010, p. 6).

b) Democracy promotion

Democracy promotion or assistance has become, over the past two decades, another area of research in its own right. It looks at intentional efforts of countries to influence a political regime type in its (near or far) abroad and their effectiveness. The sobering experience has been that "we really don't know" whether it works or not (Burnell, 2007; see also Burnell & Schlumberger, 2010, pp. 6-9). Yet, Carothers (1999) saw democracy promoters on a "learning curve", and the promotion of democracy in the international arena has become a large business with many actors involved. What the literature has brought forth to date are a few results.

First, democracy promotion can only be effective to the extent it follows the "three Cs of democracy promotion", that is, context, credibility and consistency. To begin with, aid has to be context-sensitive, which requires an intimate knowledge of the local landscape of actors. Second, it has to be credible, which means that countries promoting democracy abroad have to domestically follow the norms and rules they promote externally. Third, finally, it has to be consistent in the sense that the promotion of democracy will not succeed when the goal of democratisation is compromised and overridden by competing policy objectives (Grävingholt, Leininger, & Schlumberger, 2009).

Second, democratisation through military intervention is unlikely to lead to consolidated democracy. Although there are historical examples in the immediate post–Second World War era (e.g. Germany, Japan) where this endeavour succeeded, more recent instances of military intervention have not resulted in establishing democratic regimes (e.g. Iraq, Afghanistan). Some have argued that, if not forced to react to pressures caused by democracy promotion, autocracies have, *ceteris paribus*, an "overarching interest in political stability", which dominates their desire for systems convergence towards autocracy (Bader, Grävingholt, & Kästner, 2010, p. 81). In a similar vein, others have claimed that "the 'rollback-hypothesis' put forth by Diamond and Freedom House […] can neither be supported by figures nor by arguments" and that "a 'reverse wave' is currently not to be expected" (Merkel, 2010b, p. 29). Both points can today be considered empirically falsified.

Despite such optimistic outlooks on international democracy promotion, there is still not a single case to which democracy promoters could credibly refer and claim with evidence that it was *their* business that brought about democracy in that country. The reasons for this have yet to be firmly established, but there are obvious suspicions. One is the fact that the biggest heavyweights in democracy promotion (the United States and the EU) routinely also have yet greater interests that, in actual practice, put democracy promotion almost routinely in the backseat, whereas those donors who have at least in some cases acted with more respect for

31 This idea seems to have been more of an outflow of constructivist assumptions of the EU as a "normative power" (Manners, 2002) that resulted in wishful thinking rather than being based on empirical evidence. The latter suggests that such "norm export", as a rule, does not work as assumed by some earlier authors.

the abovementioned "three Cs" (such as, at times, the Netherlands or some Scandinavian countries) are maybe impactful locally, but are too small to cause democratisation themselves in a country abroad. Overall, it seems to make little difference for transition to occur or not occur whether or not the case in question was targeted by democracy promoters prior to transition or not.[32]

Apart from this, a more fundamental critique that the democracy promotion industry had a difficult time to digest was raised by one former United States Agency for International Development practitioner of such policies, Thomas Carothers. In a much-read 2002 contribution to the *Journal of Democracy*, Carothers (2002) somewhat provocatively proclaimed "the end of the transition paradigm". His initial observation was that not all countries that were deemed to be "transitional" were actually on a path towards democracy. Transitology itself, in his view, was at an end because it had led policy-makers onto false tracks due to its "implicit assumptions". The core of the problem, according to Carothers, was that "once so labelled [transition countries; author], their political life was automatically analyzed in terms of their movement toward or away from democracy, and they were held up to the implicit expectations of the paradigm" (Carothers, 2002, p. 7). These consisted, in his view, of five core points:

- that political change and transition would always be in the direction of democratisation and away from authoritarian rule;
- that democratisation would always occur along a fixed process of liberalisation, democratisation and (democratic) consolidation, meaning that liberalisation could automatically be seen as a precursor to subsequent democratisation;
- that elections played the key role in the process of transition, which then would itself lead to further democratic gains in other realms;
- that structural factors such as levels of socio-economic development; prior political regime type; socio-cultural traditions or institutional heritage would not impact on the initiation, process or results of transition, but that the latter be determined by the behaviour and competence of political elites;
- that democratic transitions were building on well-established and functional structures of statehood.

All these expectations are, as Carothers demonstrated on the basis of an empirical overview, wrong. However, his critique was met with little understanding in science, as the scholars referred to by Carothers had actually not claimed what he suggested they had, and so they replied accordingly. These expectations turned out to be based on abridged and popularised bits and pieces of unduly truncated knowledge that arrived incomplete in practitioners' offices whose task it was to devise policy strategies. Therefore, Carothers' criticism hardly touched the debates *within* research,[33] whereas it did expose many of policy-makers'

32 Freyburg's (2011) argument – that even though democracy promotion may not have resulted in outright democracy, it was effective, in that it managed to bring about democratic institutions or improvements to such institutions – must be rejected. This fully and utterly ignores a larger literature that emphasises the fact that more often than not, it is in the best interest of autocrats to create and develop such democratic-looking institutions precisely to avoid democratisation. More on this in Part II below.

33 See also O'Donnell's reply in the subsequent 2002 issue of *Journal of Democracy* (13(3)).

misreadings of the literature, which had led Western donors and their implementing agencies to devise and implement barely sustainable strategies in their efforts at spreading democracy abroad (see Schlumberger & Karadag, 2006, p. 246f.; see also Schlumberger, 2006a, on dilemmas of democracy promotion policies in authoritarian contexts). To be fair, there is certainly a learning curve, and most who are involved in the practice of aiding democracy abroad know today that a post-conflict situation of fragile statehood is not the same context as a closed authoritarian regime. There is also a more widespread understanding that the benevolence of government to implement measures of democracy promotion seriously cannot be taken for granted and that instead, more often than not, such efforts would threaten the very political lifeline of incumbent elites. Yet, when it comes to the question of systemic political change, it still remains true what Burnell (2007) confessed more than a decade ago: When asking whether or not democracy promotion works, "We really don't know".

c) "Tectonic shifts" in world order

A third argument that places international factors at the centre of the prospects for democratic systemic change is a geopolitical one and associated with recent advances in International Relations. The main idea is that, after the end of the American "Empire" (Hardt & Negri, 2000), or Western liberal ideological hegemony more broadly, a unilateral world under US auspices will come to its end. Instead, the renewed rise of non-Western great powers that are less democratic in nature will impact on the prospects of democracy in all world regions beyond great powers.

Due to what Ikenberry called "tectonic shifts" in global order, global power is moving towards the new centres of Russia, but more importantly towards China. This is seen as impacting negatively on Western democracies' ability to influence regime type in third countries (such as in the Middle East). Such possibilities seem bound to decrease even further, alongside with Western relative power in the global system. Second, this trend would at least indirectly be reinforced through a changing architecture in the landscape of international institutions, as many international institutions had been seen as being US-dominated in the past. In Drezner's words: "The tectonic shift will pose a challenge to the US-dominated global institutions" (Drezner, 2007). Although Ikenberry optimistically, from his perspective, believes that "the US will remain the world's most powerful state for decades to come" (Ikenberry, 2011, p. 31), others are convinced that "the American World Order is coming to an end, whether or not America itself is declining" (Acharya, 2014, p. 2). A decade on, the second view seems to bear greater correctness than the first.

All of this only indirectly impacts on the question of democratisation, of course. But such tectonic shifts arguably render Western leverages much more tenuous, and they make the business of democracy promotion and the possibilities for effective political conditionality much more difficult to implement for liberal democracies than they had been during the last part of the 20th century, even if the political will to do so was there. The greater presence and assertiveness of China as well as Russia's renewed rise to great power status enhances the possibilities of "diversification" for autocrats in their foreign policies: "States which need economic, military or political assistance no longer either have to go to the democratic West or go without" (Ambrosio, 2009, p. 3).

4 Conditions for democratisation: Towards observable indicators (I)

From what has been said up to here, Section 2 enables us to make an informed judgement on the question of whether or not Arab democracies exist. Furthermore, Section 3 has laid half the ground for cautiously answering the question regarding the likelihood of systemic political change in a given case: We now know many variables that might each be responsible for causing systemic political change in the direction of democratisation. It is the main task of Section 4 to summarise these and distil guiding questions from Section 3 on the main hypothesised variables, as discussed above, in order to allow observers to analyse whether, and to what extent, factors that have been found to – potentially – cause democratisation are present in the case they look at. Further down, this list of push-factors is complemented by pull-factors that work in the opposite direction: Those can be considered pull-factors that work in the direction of non-transition, or authoritarian survival and resilience.

If none of the abovementioned push-factors are present (which will hardly be the case for any country on Earth), democratisation may safely be assumed to not occur. If one or more such push-factors are present in any given context, then logically democratisation *may* take place, but *need not*. This is so because we then have a necessary condition (namely, a factor that has already been assumed to have caused democratisation in one or more instances), but not a sufficient one (i.e. we do not know for sure whether the old hypotheses were correct, not what other conditions might be needed for this one factor to actually become effective). To avoid false expectations, the section starts with some general remarks on the caveats of predicting complex, multidimensional social developments.

4.1 Asking for the likelihood of systemic change

What determines the likelihood of transitions occurring at some (long-term? short-term?) future point in time? Three preliminary remarks are necessary to point out and understand important caveats.

First, it is *impossible in principle* to predict exceptional political events such as revolutions or transitions for epistemological reasons (see Goodwin, 2011). This is due, first, to the high degree of contingency that is innate to all processes of systemic political change of various types. The respective interdependence and interaction of structural and actor-related factors vary from case to case and need to be analysed case-specifically. Second, actors might be rational – although even this is a matter of debate since transitional processes happen outside normal political processes, and thus actors are affected by "amorphous rumours, heightened emotions and conflicting duties" (Kurzman, 2004, p. 170) – but in transition processes, stakes are usually very high and quite regularly even include questions of life and death for the actors involved.[34] Third, even if actors do act rationally, it is often far from clear what decisions rational behaviour would prescribe at what point in a "game of transition", and it

34 There is a literature of the historical-institutionalist approach that focuses on "critical junctures" or "turning points", during which institutions are claimed to be more in flux, than in "normal" times, when path-dependent developments dominate. Yet, for the purpose of studying democratic transitions, this has remained a strand that brought marginal insights. For a good introductory article, see Cappocia and Kelemen (2007).

is equally unclear what type of game situation actors are in, with how many players (actors themselves might not know for sure who is playing), and whether cooperative or defective strategies will work out best. Fourth, actors' preference orders can and do change as the game unfolds as do, fifth, the rules of the game itself: During transitions, contingency is at its maximum.

As a second caveat, be aware that the transitology literature is neither appropriate nor *meant* for explaining political dynamics in different directions, but only aims at explaining systemic political change as far as it concerns *democratic transitions*. That literature does *not* aim at explaining systemic change in the opposite direction (de-democratisation or autocratisation), nor does it (cl)aim to explain regime survival, reform within regimes or state erosion. The dependent variable or *explanandum* is democratic transition and not any of these other phenomena. Thus, this literature provides us with analytical tools that are usefully applicable only for a certain range of empirical phenomena.

Third, almost none of the concepts found to be important for explaining political transitions are directly measurable, and the complicated process of operationalising them contains as many pitfalls as identifying the right variables themselves (again, even the latter will differ for any given case). Since all transitions are caused by more than just a single variable (but we usually do not know how many variables are at play!), expert knowledge about any given case under scrutiny is imperative. Otherwise, it is impossible to reliably identify at least the most important variables for that case, let alone the relative weight that individual factors assume in that concrete case. Despite the many efforts at generalising inductively derived knowledge, the bottom line of what we know about democratisation after more than half a century of research on the topic is that there is no identifiable combination of variables or pattern of processes that would underlie transitions more generally. This can be said with a relatively high degree of certainty. All in all, therefore, it is much easier to get things wrong in analysing political transitions than to get them right – and this holds true particularly in the absence of in-depth expertise, not only in the theoretical fields and the interplay of variables, but also in the empirical cases to be examined.

4.2 The variables and how to study them

However, all that does not mean that nothing can be said about the likelihood of transition or about factors that make systemic change more likely than when they are absent. The review of theories about democratic transitions reveals some of the factors that *can* impact on such probabilities, even though full explanations of transitions are only possible ex post, once they have happened. And while no general consensus exists as to the relative weight of explanatory factors in relation to one another, there is in fact a consensus today that at least both actor-related as well as structural conditions need to be looked at. It is thus possible to identify several proposed variables and to give at least a few hints as to their possible operationalisation (see also Annex A1).

A range of guiding questions might be helpful in the examination of any given case in which the aim is to determine whether or not systemic change or political transition has become more likely at any point $t+1$ than at any prior point t in time. Such questions can be structured along the abovementioned approaches that attribute key importance to individual factors or bundles of factors. In a second step, the key concepts contained in such questions

can then be made amenable to operationalisation and testing or – more adequately and in Sartori's words – to "comparative checking" (Sartori, 1991).

Advocates of modernisation theory, when asked about the likelihood of democratic transition in a given case, will ask: Has the country undergone a comprehensive process of socio-economic modernisation that includes industrialisation, urbanisation, the establishment of a decent educational system, and the development of means of mass communication that are available to the citizenry? Are the prevailing levels of wealth such that the country does not count among the world's poorest? Does a strong and educated urban middle class exist, and if so: Does this middle class hold moderate and democratic (or at least democracy-compatible) worldviews and actively demand its inclusion in political decision-making?[35]

Structural functionalists and systems theorists, by contrast, will want to know: How is the relation between the partial systems in a society organised? Is the overall system functionally differentiated into a range of distinguishable partial systems, each of which takes on core functions for the ensemble to survive, or is such differentiation repressed by structures or agents? Are the societal and economic subsystems autonomous, and can they operate freely enough from the massive interference of, or control exerted by, the political system? Finally: What is the shape and nature of the relations of the overall national system(s) towards the outside global and regional environment? They will then make judgements, on the basis of answers to these questions, about the capacities to successfully absorb functional and dysfunctional incentives that the political system possesses at a given point in time, and from there conclude on the status of the dynamic flow equilibrium the system is believed to be in (or not to be in), and on what this means for overall systemic stability.

As to the various culturalist approaches, essentialist culturalists – or, as of today's usage of the term: Orientalists – will essentially try to determine what "civilisation" a case belongs to (which can be done by using the map of "fault lines" between them that is contained in Huntington, 1996), and by checking the rank of that civilisation in Huntington's list (see Huntington, 1984). They will then exclude possibilities of democratisation for cases that are members of the "Sino-Islamic alliance". By contrast, the prediction of the social capital-related approach is that the more social capital is accumulated within a society, the greater the likelihood of democratic transition.[36]

35 At this point, it becomes apparent to what extent the third caveat mentioned above plays into the possibilities of predicting transitions: The mode of operationalisation will shape the results of an investigation to a very large extent. Even if everyone agreed that these actually *were* the only relevant questions to ask (which is by no means the case, as Section 3 has demonstrated), many ensuing questions appear. An exemplary look at "wealth" may illustrate this: Is wealth to be measured by quintiles of distribution? Through per capita or national product? Through average or median income? Or rather by looking at assets instead of income? How should we deal with the question of the relative distribution of wealth within society? And so forth.

36 Obviously, unanswered questions regarding measurement loom large in this statement. Second, even if it *were* possible to comparatively gauge the "amount of social capital" present in a given society, the question would still be how to assess who exactly (i.e. what individual and collective actors) holds what amounts of social capital as opposed to others. On top of all this, of course, comes the problem discussed above in Section 3.3, that social capital can be used exclusively (i.e. in an anti-democratic fashion) just as it can be used inclusively.

Structuralists, in their turn, will ask: Is there a strong and politically independent bourgeoisie? In another version, the question is: How strong and politically independent is the working class? And in its further development, core questions to be asked are: How widely are power resources dispersed throughout society? How equitable is wealth distributed within a society?

Those who favour actor-centred approaches, in turn, will ask: Are there splits within the authoritarian bloc that allow for hardliners and softliners to be identified? Does a recognisable opposition exist that can organise and mobilise against the regime? Are softliners able to neutralise hardliners within the regime, and are the moderates in the opposition able to neutralise radical voices? In the further course of the process, more questions arise, such as: Do regime softliners change their order of preferences and turn into democratisers, that is, do they become willing to give up authoritarian rule and accept a democratic political game? Only if all questions are answered with "yes" will, according to this approach, democratisation take place.

Finally, those who claim that international factors are key to explaining democratic transitions will ask: What does the regional environment of the case in question look like: Is there a cluster of democracies that surrounds the examined case, or is the environment predominantly authoritarian? How dense are the linkages to democracies, and what degree of leverage are democracies not only able to exert, but also effectively willing to exert on the case? In other words: Are there external forces exerting significant pressure from the outside in the direction of democratic change? What instruments of leverage are applied, and with what degree of consistency? Are there countervailing forces that might weigh in to achieve the opposite result (maintenance of the authoritarian status quo), and how is the balance between such forces? Has the global great power environment evolved in a way that is conducive or obstructive to democratisation of the particular case, and to what extent?

In sum, thus, if an analysis seriously examines all these questions, a fairly comprehensive picture will emerge that does not run a great risk of missing important variables that might render transition more likely. Each of the questions above can be considered a potentially important indicator of the likelihood by which systemic change will or will not occur in any given case. Many of those indicators have previously been operationalised, in one way or another (but more often many different ways). It is the task of the analyst who works on a particular case to review existing operationalisations and check their adequacy (and data availability and -reliability) for the respective case (see also Annex A1 for an overview of the indicators mentioned here).

Yet, in all that, the three caveats elaborated above need to be remembered:

> Which causes underlie a transition can only be researched for each transition in a concrete analysis. Only such an examination of the case-related crystallization of specific linkages, mutual reinforcements, or neutralizations of the various conditional factors can assess their specific influence on the end of an autocratic system and the beginning of democratization. […] The specific combinations of structural causes that trigger the breakdown of an autocratic system vary as much as do the number, type, and meaning of participant actors and their actions. Therefore, it always takes the concrete analysis of the interaction of structural changes and political behavior in order to explain the breakdown of a political system. (Merkel, 2010a, p. 96f.)

Furthermore, a word of warning is in order: "The often-seen random listing of 'economic', 'social' and 'political' factors as causes of transitions is analytically deficient. Those clusters of factors must not be listed additively, but must be assessed in their case-related specific interdependence" (Merkel, 2010a, p. 97).[37]

To make things even more complicated: If the possible outcome of "transition" is to be evaluated against the possible outcome of "non-transition", or "regime maintenance", other factors that account for and signal regime survival, regime resilience or regime (re-)consolidation must also be known and taken into consideration. For this reason, the following part of the paper is devoted to an examination of symptoms that signal regime resilience and survival.

37 Obviously, this falls outside of what a theoretical concept paper can (or even should) do – which is why the "listing" of factors, as done here, might look random, but it fulfils the purpose of giving the necessary overview of *potentially* relevant variables.

Part II

Theories of authoritarian resilience

Whereas Part I above thus provides the background of explanatory factors that might cause systemic change of regime to occur, this second part looks at approaches that aim at explaining authoritarian regime maintenance and the survival of authoritarian regimes, as opposed to their end by democratisation. Both the push-factors for democratisation and the pull-factors towards authoritarian survival must be taken into account if a full picture is to be gained and informed statements are to be made about the likelihood of political regime change vs. regime survival. In a similar vein, Frantz clarifies that "analyses that […] solely look at democratization will be unable to recognize those factors that affect transitions to new dictatorships but not transitions to democracy" (Frantz, 2018, p. 134).

Therefore, the Part II reviews the "new research on authoritarian regimes" as it has been burgeoning over approximately the past two decades.[38] Section 5 discusses the dimensions and characteristics of the still growing "new research on authoritarianism" as far as it relates to the assumed causes of authoritarian survival or regime maintenance. Structural factors will be dealt with more briefly than the ones that relate to intentional strategies that autocrats make use of in their struggle for power maintenance. Thus, the section puts a special emphasis on one particularly challenging set of factors that are often misread: The actor-centred factors that consist of means and instruments which autocrats typically use to ensure their own survival in office. Autocrats employ such strategies constantly during "normal" times, but as the toolkit of such instruments is rather broad, it can be expected – and has been found – to be expanded to include the simultaneous use of multiple regime-maintaining strategies and instruments. Section 6 then, along the lines of Section 4, aims at condensing the relevant variables from this discussion as suggested by the literature reviewed here. It provides interim conclusions with guiding questions for empirical analyses, and thereby hints at what to watch out for in such an endeavour. With that it aims at moving the analysis towards observable indicators for the pull-factors of authoritarian power maintenance that might be at work in any given case.

5 The recent research on authoritarianism

The past 15 years or so have witnessed an unprecedented interest in authoritarianism, which turned this research into what Art (2012, p. 351) called "one of the hottest sub-fields in Comparative Politics", and into one that later during the decade "still was the fastest-growing" (Schlumberger, 2017, p. 4); it now comprises hundreds, potentially thousands, of contributions in various fields.

Several main strands of this "new research on authoritarianism" (which admittedly is no longer that new today) deal with virtually all the more *political* questions one can ask about such regimes, from their birth conditions (regime formation processes) to their decay and death (regime breakdown). Much of the research is devoted to the analysis of the inner working mechanisms – and more particularly distinct institutions. The scholarly interest here ranges from oppositional movements to electoral laws to party systems to types of repression and legitimacy as well as their economic foundations; the string that focusses mostly on

38 This is in contrast to a now classical, older literature on authoritarianism that dates from the 1960s to 1980s, and which is usually treated as distinct from the more recent literature, which only started to appear in the 2000s.

formal institutions (such as political parties, elections, the military and security forces, the legal environment and the judiciary, parliaments, etc.) can safely be said to be the most prominent one. Ultimately, however, the motivation for much of this literature resides in the desire to know more about how and why such regimes survive even though, for decades, the standard assumption had been that autocracies were inferior economically and politically, inherently endowed with lesser levels of legitimacy, and ultimately failed projects. *Authoritarian resilience*, that is, the question of why authoritarian regimes persist and what they do to do so, is thus at least implicitly the main focus and motivation for the rapid growth of this industry in many of its facets (for overviews and reviews, see Art, 2012; Pepinsky, 2014; Schlumberger, 2017; Schlumberger & Schedler, 2020).

Sadly, however, output has grown much faster than the certainty by which we know things, which is why it is fair to say – and its representatives would for the most part agree – that this literature is to a large extent still in its adolescence: Innumerable hypotheses and "theories" have been suggested to explain almost everything we can imagine. Almost every contribution claims to test (and, of course, to find evidence for) their own assumptions – regardless of whether or not they contradict others already published – with each claiming that their own approach towards studying the field "provides the best explanation" (Slater, 2010, p. 230). Thus, although it is true that many open questions await examination and conclusive results, the problem is not so much that large parts of the terrain remain unchartered, but that too many competing explanations for too many *explananda* have been invoked without adjudication of contradictory research results. Yet, it would be unfair to frame this as a reproach: The current state of the literature also reflects that this research has had half a century less to evolve in comparison to the literature on democratisation.

This is also not to say that the more recent study of authoritarianism has been without merit or in vain. First, of course, the study of authoritarianism in its own right has blown fresh air into the political science research landscape, in that it has raised fundamental questions that have long been latently present, but not explicitly addressed.[39] Second, a few things are not entirely unknown. The increased depth of the findings becomes more evidently manifest as we go down into more clearly delineated branches of what has grown to become the larger branches of the tree of authoritarianism research.[40]

As with other important sub-fields of the social sciences, there are contributions that emphasise more the structural phenomena and others that focus on actors and their behaviour as the more important variables. This section does not discriminate between the

39 Such as, for instance, the one that asks about the methods by which we study authoritarian contexts more generally and thereby risk not only endangering ourselves and informants, as regimes are "information-shy" (Henry & Springborg, 2010), but also to reproduce false information deliberately made up by regimes – if we are uncritical about the sources we use. Furthermore, there might actually be no way of verifying the truth of information, which then poses serious methodological challenges to the social sciences, not least because we know that to establish such uncertainty is precisely the agenda authoritarians pursue. Ahram and Goode (2016) have provided the best preliminary thoughts on this topic. See also Proctor and Schiebinger (2008) and Croissant (2014).

40 One such example, even if only a very small one, may serve as an example, and that is the so-called Arab Monarchy Debate, which is discussed in the empirical part III (Section 7.3) below, because it is geographically closely tied to the MENA region and potentially helpful in explaining what kinds of trajectories the monarchical regimes in this world region have experienced. It is thus an integral part of the analysis of political change in the MENA region in non-presidential regimes.

two, but it also has no ambition of being exhaustive. The literature in the meantime has become too unwieldy, and too little time has passed to tell what of this literature will remain and what will be forgotten with good reason. However, some of those arguments that remain are easy to tell, and Section 5 focuses on such arguments, starting, as in Section 3, with structural points before moving on to actor-centred ones.

5.1 Structural factors: The international, the economic and regime structures

As mentioned in the introduction to this section, structural factors exist and are important, but they are arguably better known and more commonly discussed in the broader public than are those intricate strategies and techniques by which autocrats seek to ensure the perpetuation of political power. Nevertheless, such structural variables are too important to be ignored, and an analysis without them would be incomplete.

5.1.1 The international sphere

The international context, which in democratisation research long remained neglected, made it onto the research agenda of autocracy scholars early on. Again, this has several dimensions, but one is that some actors find it beneficial and desirable when democracies are unsettled and autocracy prevails. Actors who intentionally pursue policies to foster autocracy have, in the literature that explores this phenomenon, come to be called "black knights". The main reason might be that this phenomenon has tended, until very recently, to be overlooked by democracy promoters, which is due to several crucial aspects.

First, these courses of action have sometimes been practiced by those whom we would not suspect of doing so. Bush (2015), for instance, makes the important point regarding democracy promotion that most programmes that aid democracy abroad do not even actually seek changes of regime, that is, democratisation, and that therefore, democracy promotion had become "tamed".[41] A broad range of empirical case studies on self-declared democracy promoters such as the United States and the EU unambiguously showed that these actors have – and also *how* they have – "failed to fulfil idealistic commitments to support democratic reform" (Youngs, 2010, p. 6).[42] That means that part of the impact of autocracy promotion comes de facto from actors who guise themselves as democracy promoters, but de facto exercise what Brownlee (2012) calls "democracy prevention". The global centres of democracy for instance – and most importantly the United States – have thus by and large failed to lend genuine support to democratic transitions, and they have effectively often acted to the contrary. Likewise, "EU support for change remained less than far-reaching." Observable "insipid European incrementalism" has left it like "a rabbit frozen in the

41 One reason is that pro-democratic non-state actors in recipient countries have an interest in survival and will therefore refrain from massively challenging regime elites.

42 Another reason is that established democracies' aim of promoting and defending abroad often becomes compromised through the presence of other, overriding policy goals. This phenomenon, while more prominent in the post-2000s literature, is not new in itself. Whitehead (1986, p. 16), for one, claims that "once the USA had made its peace with Peronist Argentina (by mid-1947), the defense of democracy became conflated with anti-Communism".

headlights of unpredictable change" that was "caught in the tailwinds of rebellion, dragged along reluctantly" (Youngs, 2014, p. 6). These are just some of the attributes that the EU and its member states earned from the scholarly community during their decidedly uninspired reaction to the Arab uprisings (Youngs, 2014, p. 6).

This same international sphere is, second, not only shaped by democracy preventers and lacking support for transition by democratic forces in the global arena, but also by the presence of autocratic "black knights" who actively devise policies that aim at fostering and supporting authoritarianism abroad. Autocracies actively engage in countering strategies of Western democracy promotion through an elaborated set of strategies and techniques, and they cooperate and coordinate in devising such strategies and implementing them internationally across borders. This also means that smaller and dependent autocracies have the option of seeking alliances with strong powers that do not ask for the human rights standards or good governance levels which Western donors sometimes wish to see in their partners.

Third, regional and global coordination (if not integration) through decidedly authoritarian platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation or the recently expanded Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, which now also includes non-Gulf countries) are a new and arguably anti-democratic feature of the 21st century's international order: "The positive relationships between countries such as China, Russia, Myanmar, Belarus, Iran and Venezuela are examples of how authoritarian regimes are increasingly aligning with each other" (Ambrosio, 2009 p. 3). The "black-knight phenomenon" is today not restricted to meddling with authoritarian elections – it has broadened geographically and thematically to gain a truly global scope and reach into all possible areas that aim at undermining democracy where it exists, and at preventing it where it does not.

What makes research into this field complicated is that, whereas democracy promoters might do more harm than good, they are at least easily recognisable: They usually wear the hat of their governments and usually like to put shiny brass plates onto what they paid for so that the world can see what good they did. It is the opposite with black knights: They do not operate in the open but covertly, and they are secretive about what their work exactly consists of. The results are often only seen ex post, and if so by accident or because of some leaked information (Panama Papers, WikiLeaks, fled former trolls, and the like). As is known today, they not only try to counter existing pressures for democratisation that originate from liberal democracies in "the West" (see Tolstrup, 2015), but they also undertake large-scale efforts at destabilising even the traditional centres of the democratic world and at derailing democratic regimes in the United States and Europe. Unlike a few decades ago, Russian efforts in particular are today omnipresent in the Western media discourse,[43] and the existence of these efforts is confirmed beyond doubt (see also Cameron & Orenstein, 2013). All this contributes to an international context in which authoritarian diffusion (for a conceptual framework, see Ambrosio, 2010) is more prominent than ever before.

Thus, not only do democracies pursue questionable practices of prioritising policies that do not further, but actively prevent, democracy (see Section 3.4 above; for a more in depth look

43 Such as meddling with the American presidential elections of 2016; operating regime-controlled troll farms in both St. Petersburg and Moscow; providing widespread support to extremist political parties in Europe; as well as spreading fake news via both automatised bots and humans for various target audiences throughout the Western world and beyond.

on this, see i.a. Brownlee, 2012), but autocrats also engage in parallel efforts at "promoting autocracy abroad" (Vanderhill, 2013). Countries such as Russia, Iran, Venezuela and others have pro-actively devised strategies of autocracy promotion. In addition to the failure of democracy promotion and the simultaneous emergence of autocracy promotion through a wide array of instruments, another element to consider is that autocrats do not act independently of one another. Processes of "authoritarian learning" (Bank & Edel, 2015; Diamond, 2006; Hall & Ambrosio, 2017; Heydemann & Leenders, 2011) and emulation, whether regional (Jackson, 2010) or cross-regional, have enabled autocrats to better weather the storms of democratic pressures, and this topic has now become a research field in its own right.[44]

Also, authoritarian regimes have been increasingly linking up with one another, which results in processes of an increased density of interactions in a broad range of areas – the most important for the present discussion paper being the sphere of military and security cooperation. There has thus been an increase in authoritarian linkages. This has been found to enhance prospects of authoritarian survival (Tansey, Köhler, & Schmotz, 2017). Such increased linkages have also facilitated processes of mutual authoritarian learning between autocracies about survival strategies, coup-proofing and a range of other areas of importance to regime maintenance (see Bank & Edel, 2015; Heydemann & Leenders, 2011). Authoritarian learning refers to the "process in which authoritarian regimes adopt survival strategies based upon the prior successes and failures of other governments" (Hall & Ambrosio, 2017, p. 143). Although intuitively plausible and though first empirical evidence has been collected, this research has only just begun. We know, however, that such learning processes are sometimes elevated to a level of cooperation in which regimes have established avenues to routinise the exchange of information on dissidents between them, and even prosecute citizens in one country for "offences" or critical stances taken against another regime outside the country to which the critique applies (sometimes referred to as "cross-policing" and "cross-sanctioning").

5.1.2 The economic sphere

The now famous linkage-leverage theorem claims that the greater the Western (read: democratic) leverage over a target country is, the greater the chances that it will be more amenable to democratic pressures (Levitsky & Way, 2006; see Section 3 above). Logically, however, there is no reason to assume that such linkages and leverage only exist unidirectionally, that is, in the direction promoting democracy. Leaving out military intervention, leverage from a distance is arguably strongest when outside powers can effectively and credibly threaten to hurt the regime in question economically. Therefore, an important structural dimension for answering the question about the likelihood of systemic

44 Unfortunately, most of these insights have not, or only partially been, integrated into the research on democracy promotion, but remain isolated from it. Therefore, "this [democracy promotion] literature will be deficient" (Ambrosio, 2009, p. 11). Although there are very obviously actors involved in this international dimension, these actors usually reside outside the countries that are studied, and their behaviour is embedded in regional and global constellations, economic and military alliances, as well as in the overall foreign policy rationales of their own countries, so that the pull-factors on this international level are often subsumed under "structural" rather than actor-related variables.

political change is whether or not the regime under scrutiny is vulnerable to external economic pressures.

Yet, pro-democratic economic sanctions, such as those enacted and repeatedly prolonged by the EU against Russia, for example, have shown little effect, let alone on the mode of governance. By contrast, China has both a very large domestic market (and thus an irresistible attractiveness to big international corporations) and a very strong national economy. Thus, no country in the world would even think about cutting off its economic ties with China. Smaller and economically more marginal and less self-sustained countries may be much more prone to not only economic pressures against democracy, but also a lack of adherence as to what are still considered global standards in political and economic behaviour.

By contrast, the economic structures of some countries make them de facto indispensable for the global economy, even though they are neither military nor economic heavyweights like the Russian and Chinese autocracies (prime examples are Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). It is therefore useful to look at both the geo-economic position of a country in the global economy as well as the structure of its economy: If it is endowed with scarce resources that the global economy depends on, statistical findings are that this "hinders democracy", as Ross has examined with respect to oil (Ross, 2001).

A different but related point does not concern a country's economic position in the global economy, but rather the domestic effects of its richness in exportable resources. For decades, rentier state theory has established that if a country's economy is one-sidedly built on the export of mineral resources (most prominently oil and natural gas), the earnings of which accrue to the state, then the state becomes autonomous from its own population: It no longer needs to extract taxes and levy other fees from the population, and thus the notion that the state "owes" its citizens something in return is absent (Luciani, 1987; Pawelka, 1993; Schlumberger, 2006b; and others). In such cases, the regime elites control the necessary resources to sustain their monopolisation of political power because it provides them with the necessary means to engage in some extremely costly strategies of regime maintenance, such as the co-optation of potential rivals as well as heavily subsidising the entire population (more on this below in the sub-section on co-optation). It must be born in mind here that it is not the level to which countries are endowed with resources per se that matters but, first, the degree to which the earnings from such resources are at the disposal of the ruling elites, and, second, the "allocative power" they provide these elites with in relation to the size of the population to be alimented.[45]

45 Hence, for instance, despite similar levels of income from the export of oil and gas, a large country such as Nigeria, with a population of ca. 197 million, can buy far less loyalty from its citizens than can a country with a small population, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with less than 2 million nationals. In other words, this means that, *ceteris paribus* (global market prices, etc.), the UAE's "allocative power" is roughly 100 times higher than that of Nigeria.

5.1.3 Regime subtype and patterns of authority

The type of authoritarianism and the very nature of a given political regime in place have also been found to impact on the life expectancy of regimes, even though that does not necessarily mean that incumbents remain in office (Geddes, Wright, & Frantz, 2014b; see also Frantz, 2018, p. 127ff.). These recent analyses have found, only after larger databases had been established, that military regimes such as the juntas that were in power in Latin America and Greece in the 1970s and 1980s, respectively, statistically have the shortest duration among all dictatorships. By contrast, personalist regimes have the longest duration,[46] and at the same time, they are also the ones that are on the rise numerically and are today the most frequently encountered authoritarian subtype. This means that the characteristics and specificities of a particular kind of authoritarian regime – that is, how an authoritarian regime is structured – have an impact on a whole range of variables, among them the likelihood of transition. Moreover, in contrast to some of the other potential variables that are among the pull-factors discussed here, this finding can be considered a robust result due to the generality by which it holds true globally.

Another such structural variable has almost been forgotten, but it might be potentially relevant for assessing the likelihood of systemic change, and this concerns the patterns of authority that exist in any given case. If the patterns of domination that are enacted by the political regime are similar to those that prevail in society at large, this is assumed to contribute to overall political regime stability rather than to systemic change: "A government will be stable if its authority pattern is congruent with the other authority patterns of the society of which it is part" (Eckstein, 1991, p. 188; see also Eckstein, 1969, 1971, 1997; Eckstein & Gurr, 1975; Gurr, 1974). This theorem has become known as the congruence theorem (see also Schlumberger, 2008b, pp. 102-110, 130; Schlumberger, Kreitmeyr, & Matzke, 2013, p. 38f.). This is a meta-level argument that also applies to autocracies. It thus includes other, more specific arguments on a less abstract level, such as Albrecht's dictum that "a democracy is not possible without a civil society" (Albrecht, 2005), or the argument that societal organisation needs to be as open, permissive and democratic as possible in order to constitute an element supportive of democratisation, or, vice versa, that strongly patriarchal societal relations are conducive to the survival of patrimonial (and thus authoritarian) types of political rule (Schlumberger, 2008b, pp. 102-110). Although plausible, one caveat is that "patterns of authority" is a variable that is not easy to operationalise with some analytical rigor on the societal level. It might be that, ultimately, this argument refers back to successful legitimation efforts by regimes: If patterns of authority are similar between regime and society, that might either be read as the regime being good at representing some integral feature of societal organisation, or vice versa, that the regime is so much in control over society that it manages to install its own patterns of authority onto society at large. Neither is by any means self-understood. It therefore seems to be worth investing time to look at this question of congruence in an empirical analysis.

46 In between lie single party regimes and mixed types.

5.2 Autocrats' strategies of authoritarian survival

The factors discussed in the previous sub-section represent important *structural* factors that can greatly enhance the prospects of authoritarian regime survival and resilience. Of course, all of these have to be considered when assessing the likelihood of political regime change. But apart from these, there are also micro-level factors that put elite actors in nondemocratic settings – and their deliberate policy choices – centre-stage. This is what the following pages are about.

As a preliminary remark – and in accordance with the burgeoning and, by now, vast wave of research on authoritarianism[47] – the basic rule for studying autocracy is: "Autocrats pursue policies to maximize their survival" (Yom & Gause, 2012, p. 75). This is because "all authoritarian leaders have the same goal: to stay in power for as long as possible" (Frantz, 2018, p. 17). Consequently, observers must not – because of their own normative bias towards democracy, because of political desirability, because of their origins, or because of the assumed desires of their readers, nor for any other extra-scientific reasons – mistake political measures undertaken by incumbent non-democratic leaders and the elites who run their regimes as measures that are aimed at democratisation. Massive empirical evidence to the contrary has been compiled over the past quarter century by international scholars. Rather, all political measures undertaken by authoritarian rulers need to be scrutinised against the backdrop of inhowfar they contribute to "maximise survival", rather than against a backdrop of wishful thinking about how they might further the cause of democracy or democratisation. It is precisely the opposite that rulers aim for. If actor-centred approaches in the social sciences have anything to tell us, then it would be absurd to assume that rational policy-makers wilfully and intentionally implement policies that work against their own top preference for power maintenance and political survival in office.[48]

Although political survival in office is one thing, this struggle can easily turn into a struggle for physical survival, as the fate of Libya's former ruler Ghaddafi illustrates. The stakes in conflicts about regime transition are extraordinarily high. It is against this background that regime reactions need to be gauged. Incumbent regime elites reacted to the mass uprisings in a number of different, non-exclusive ways. Usually, such regime reactions consisted of a mix of several measures that were taken in order to (a) quell the protests themselves and (b) to – often cosmetically – address demands that were raised by protesters.

Simultaneously, these measures include – and overlap to a large extent with – the already known and previously analysed techniques of power maintenance that are seen as being

47 For a more in-depth review of the past two decades of research on authoritarianism in its various dimensions, see Schlumberger (2017) and Schlumberger and Schedler (2020).

48 Of course, this does not exclude the possibility of false policy choices and errors in decision-making. However, it also needs to be remembered that, due to the quasi-unlimited concentration of resources, autocrats can usually afford more professional and better advisors than can democrats because they owe no accountability for their spendings to bodies such as parliaments that control them, and can therefore offer higher honoraria than can democracies (and they actually do hire them from – mostly Western – firms and policy circles). The level of information, strategic reflection and ability to anticipate possible consequences of decisions made must therefore be assumed to be higher than among democratic leaders.

typical of autocrats in times of perceived crises. The most common strategies by which rulers have tried to accommodate, crush, repress or co-opt protests are the following:

- Increased repression and surveillance
- Co-optation, patronage and buying off dissent
- Management of the opposition
- Intensification of identity politics
- Political reform and liberalisation

It is important to note that none of these elements can be looked at in isolation from the others because incumbents mix the above-listed (and other) elements in various combinations that render them specific to the place and time in which a strategy is devised. This also goes for political reforms. According to the nature of reform as a "sovereign act" (Greven, 1978, p. 40), reform is effectuated by incumbent elites as part of a more encompassing set of regime survival strategies in which reforms are but one part. Therefore, any assessment of the scope, nature and aims of political reform in a given case needs to be embedded and examined in the context of the overall evolution of a political regime.

5.2.1 Increased repression and surveillance

It is clear from the mass killings of opponents in Haiti under the Duvaliers to the massacre at Tiananmen Square in 1989: Before dictatorships cede power, they often tend to fight endgames they perceive as zero-sum games in which the opponents' victory is their own end. This is so because previous misdeeds and large-scale human rights violations make them fear for their very existence once power is stripped from them, and often rightly so as the examples of fallen dictators from Ceaușescu to Ghaddafi remind us. At the same time, repression is an important topic: Even though it has caused, since the Second World War, more deaths than war, most observers still intuitively cling to the "erroneous belief that war has claimed more lives than state repression" (Davenport, 2007a, p. 12). And despite that fact, repression remains an understudied topic.

Over the past years, however, a number of important contributions have enriched our understanding of not only the levels of, but also the types of repression as well as its interplay with other regime-enhancing factors (foundational: Davenport, 2007). The emergent literature discusses the question under what conditions regimes resort to repression (which is a costly maintenance strategy), and under which ones they shy away from it (Josua & Edel, 2015). But the question is not only whether or not regimes choose to repress, but also what type of repression is applied. Distinctions range from soft to hard repression, overt to covert repression and from juridical to extra-juridical repression. Another distinction concerns the targets of repression: Are these groups or individuals, and why (Rozenas, 2020)? Is repression exerted to deter or to punish the targeted person(s), or both? The so-called punishment puzzle (Davenport) hints to the paradox that repression sometimes does not have the intended effect of silencing opponents, but may instead lead to increased mobilisation. Yet, the mechanisms that lead to repression triggering an acquiescent or a mobilising response remain unclear (see Honari, 2018). Finally, another puzzle in this research is how autocrats legitimise the use of repression. Although one would

assume that repression decreases legitimacy, it can – if properly framed – also enhance the latter, even when it mounts to mass killings, as Josua and Edel (2015) have argued.

Thus, while there are a lot of open questions that provide a rich field for future research, it is also clear that the level of repression decreases once a country has established democracy (which is also referred to as the "domestic democratic peace"; see Davenport, 2007b). And still, when worse comes to worst, autocracies are, as a rule of thumb, almost always ready to repress if no other strategies are available. This is why the literature, despite the many unresolved puzzles, considers repression to be one of the core pillars that autocrats use in order to remain in power.

As Muasher (2013) put it with respect to Arab countries: "Stability was artificially induced by brute force."[49] Of course, the notion of stability is generally attractive to democratic and non-democratic policy-makers alike because it suggests peace and an environment in which policies for development and cooperation can be implemented successfully. Yet, with respect to the MENA region, it became obvious that what has long been (and is often still) taken for "stability", which has been prioritised as a policy objective in the foreign policies of all major Western democracies for decades, it has all too often been confused with what really is "a fata morgana of 'political stability'" (Schlumberger, 2012, p. 88) – precisely, as Muasher correctly points out, because it continues to be built on conflictual and latently or manifestly violent state–society relations. Dahrendorf, in his *Theory of Social Conflict*, predicted more than half a century ago that the repression of latent conflicts runs a high risk "of leading to situations in which the sudden and violent eruption of conflict must be viewed as the downright result of their prior suppression" (Dahrendorf, 1961, p. 226) – a point that again hints to the notion of a "domestic democratic peace", mentioned above. Therefore, the relationship between those who rule and those who are ruled as such needs to be considered when assessing the "stability" of any political system.[50]

What is more: In recent years, we have seen an increasing internationalisation of repression (or "cross-sanctioning" of dissident behaviour), which in itself is closely related to the processes of authoritarian learning and the emulation processes discussed above (Section 5.1.1).

Overall, the presence of routine repression (whatever its form and intensity may be) indicates the presence of an authoritarian regime, as it restricts liberties and positive as well as negative freedoms that are by definition guaranteed in democracies.

49 This wording neglects, of course, the distinction between regime stability on the one hand, and regime durability on the other – which arguably are not synonymous (see in particular Sluglett, 2007).

50 Another reason why state–society relations matter is (a) because of what has been referred to above (Section 5.1.3) as Eckstein's "congruence theory", and (b) because arguably, the possibility of organising collective counter-regime forces bottom-up from a certain threshold onwards that we cannot operationalise, depends on the capacity of anti-regime actors to organise. For this, in turn, a margin of autonomous societal organisation is needed so that it can organise independently of the regime and its penetration of society at large.

5.2.2 Co-optation, patronage and buying off dissent

From a theoretical perspective, it is not surprising and well-established that authoritarian regimes partially rest on co-optation as one out of three "pillars of stability" (Gerschewski, 2013); the other two being repression and legitimacy. Classically, co-optation would target counter-elites, who are secondary to the incumbents but still important enough that they are feared due to their ability to mobilise enough of a constituency to create a real challenge to the power monopoly of the regime. There are a few typical groups that are the targets of political co-optation, dependent on the subtype of authoritarian rule that is in place in a particular case:

- for instance (but not restricted to) minority positions within the ruling party in single-party systems (e.g., China),
- smaller (tolerated) groups and political parties that may or may not be represented in parliament that are aligned with – but not identical to – the dominant party in military regimes (e.g., former Uruguay, Paraguay and many others),
- tolerated opposition in hegemonic or de facto single-party systems,[51]
- parliaments as a whole in either military regimes or ruling monarchies.

These are the forces likely to be co-opted in the political sphere proper. But the process of co-optation does not stop here. To these must be added other positions of influence and relative power that, in authoritarian regimes, are usually only available to those with close relations to the ruling core elites: the heads of trade unions and business associations such as chambers of trade and industry, and the heads of professional and popular associations (e.g., bar associations, women's associations). Often, even non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are not immune to regime interference, not only with regard to their legal status and finances, but also personnel. It is not uncommon that the political regime, often the minister of the interior, has to approve of the head or board of NGOs in order for them to retain their legal status.

5.2.3 Management of the opposition

There is now a vast literature on formal institutions in autocracies (such as parliaments, parties, elections, courts, constitutions) that is informative of both patterns of co-optation as well as the carefully orchestrated manipulation of oppositional forces in non-democracies.[52] This literature demonstrates not only that a fine but sharp line exists between the rule *of* law (in democracies) and rule *by* law (in autocracies), but also that institutions which bear the same names as their democratic counterparts fulfil decisively different functions, and

51 The term hegemonic party system is used here along the lines of Sartori (1976).

52 Some of the most prominent contributions include Schedler (2002), who describes the "menu of manipulation" that is in the autocrats' hands; Magaloni (2006, 2008); Magaloni and Kricheli (2010); Gandhi (2008); Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009); Donno (2013) – all on formal political institutions in the electoral realm; or Ginsburgh and Moustafa (2008) and Ginsburgh and Simpser (2013), who study judicial institutions such as courts and constitutions under non-democratic conditions.

produce dissimilar output, in autocracies than those seemingly similar institutions do in democracies (see also Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004; Schlumberger, 2017, p. 8). The bottom line remains that "dictators engage in institution-building for a variety of reasons, but all of them aim at enhancing autocratic rule" (Schlumberger, 2017, p. 8).

The management – and indeed the active manipulation – of opposition is a permanent and core feature of authoritarian rule. Nobody has elucidated this part of the "menu of manipulation" (Schedler, 2002) of how rulers actively manage, contain, repress, foster, create and fragment their domestic oppositional forces more carefully than Ellen Lust-Okar (e.g., 2005, 2007). Through their capacity to authoritatively define the rules of who is allowed to participate in the formal political sphere and who is prohibited, the rulers have a powerful tool to shape the "structures of contestation" (Lust-Okar, 2005, 2007) according to their needs. Whereas some groups might be legally allowed to compete for seats in legislatures in a controlled setting, others may not. At times, the status even of a single oppositional group is questionable, as some members might be included whereas others of the same group, organisation, party or movement are excluded.

Thereby, the rulers retain control and prevent a unified opposition. Because by shaping the structures of contestation according to their needs, they not only shape and determine state–society relations, but also shape the relations of non-regime actors between each other. Being allowed into the formal political sphere is, of course, mostly a feature of extending patronage (from the regime's perspective) and provides access to scarce resources such as exclusive information, immunity, licences and material benefits (from the perspective of the clientelistically attached "opponent"). It obviously does not equal "political participation" in the sense of taking an active part in a political decision-making process (see also the previous sub-section on buying off dissent). Yet, the spoils that are distributed are important and valuable, and thus there is competition over them, even though they fall short of democratic pluralism. This practice has the effect of taming part of (and fragmenting all of) the opposition in order to not let any coordinated force emerge that could challenge the regime and present a credible political alternative.

A good litmus test often is the regulatory framework for the establishment of new political parties and their participation in national elections. We would only be able to speak of a democracy if it is indeed possible to establish a political party against the will of the ruling party; against the country's top military officers; without endorsement of the monarch or president or whatever members of the ruling elite; or through legal guarantees, the implementation of which is also guaranteed in actual practice through an independent judiciary. Autocracies usually take great care to not lose control of the process of who is allowed to publicly act in the political arena and who is not, as this touches the centre of their authority. Thus, seeing independent judges implement legal decisions as to the legalisation of political parties unwanted by top power-holders is something that does not happen in functioning autocracies. More often than not, if, to the researcher, that *seems* to happen, this might indicate that some deal between the rulers and the new party to the game has escaped the analyst's attention – or perhaps some hidden benefit to the regime or some factor that might not be obvious to detect on the surface of public affairs. Concluding on a democratised nature of the polity, by contrast, only makes sense after any such motive has been excluded and the possibility of its existence has been carefully and thoroughly examined.

As these lines indicate, the opposition needs to be "managed", just like the target groups of co-optation, only when it is strong and important enough to be able – in the perception of incumbent regime elites – to mobilise a credible threat to the regime's existence. There is thus an obvious interlinkage of the two strategies of co-optation on the one hand, and of the management of opposition on the other. In such cases, the oppositional forces targeted by such "management" efforts, by definition, overlap with those targeted by offers of co-optation, because part of the opposition will be included and allowed into the formal political sphere, whereas another part will be outlawed and excluded.

The legal exclusion of oppositional groups from the political game often puts them at risk physically, socially and economically: Without legal status or protection, their offices can (and usually will) be searched and maybe raided; representatives can be arrested on grounds of illegal activities and conspiracy against "public order" or the "national interest"; material assets can be seized and bank accounts frozen; travel permits and business licences can be revoked; dissidents can and usually will be publicly defamed through regime-controlled media off- and online, with fabricated allegations against the group or political party and its leaders; and so forth. After such initial demonstrations of what exclusion means – as happened, for instance, in the former communist regimes and in the military dictatorships of Latin America – the excluded opponent as an individual will usually, though not always, be given an opportunity to revoke their oppositional attitude and publicly renounce their former opinions before then being allowed to return onto the "right path".

As can be seen here, many of those measures could also be framed as part of the "repression", and this is what exclusion de facto threatens to mean for the oppositional factions that suffer from it. There still is pluralism in the political game, but, as in Linz's definition of authoritarian regimes (see Box 1 in Section 2 above), pluralism is restricted to specific groups and excludes others. Again, as in the above connection to co-optation, there is an evident and organic link between management of the opposition (this strategy) and heightened control and surveillance as a precondition for increased repression (see strategies listed in Section 5.2.1 above) and the selective application of the latter to excluded oppositional groups. It is important to note these inter-linkages between different elements of regime strategies because they do not exist in isolation. It is therefore important in analysing the empirics of authoritarian resilience to carefully assess the entire context of material and symbolic politics, political discourse and rhetoric, as well as actual policy actions for power maintenance.

In a rather bold step, Gandhi and Przeworski (2007) claim they can calculate the optimal number of oppositional parties that autocrats should have (had). They contend that it be possible for them to "identify rulers who have over-institutionalized, under-institutionalized, and optimally institutionalized by comparing the number of legislative parties that rulers should have had given the strength of the opposition with the number with which they governed in fact" (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007, p. 1290).

But, as with co-optation, "opposition management" is not restricted to the political sphere proper. Very often, such divisive strategies are extended to include large segments of society that incumbent power-holders fear could harbour counter-forces to the regime's power.

5.2.4 Intensification of identity politics and mobilisation along status identities

As is clear from the section above, nothing is more dangerous to autocrats than when the opposition unites with the goal of creating an alternative to the existing dictatorship across societal cleavages that otherwise segment the population into distinct groups (see Przeworski, 1986). Another way in which authoritarian regimes deliberately create rifts within society to forestall threats to their rule is by engaging in "identity politics".[53]

Identity politics are a deliberate strategy to exclude and marginalise opponents and – as in the above management of the political opposition in the formal and informal political arenas – often has the purpose of silencing and defaming the political opposition. In contrast to the above, however, it generalises from oppositional activists' religious or ethnic traits to de-privilege an entire ethnic or religious group. Thus, in contexts where various identities have always existed, such strategies intentionally instrumentalise them for purposes of regime maintenance. The Uighurs in western China, where it is legally forbidden to move without a mobile end-user device, by which the regime can track and anticipate larger gatherings, and where citizens were "re-educated" by the tens of thousands at the time of writing – are a prime example of that type of identity politics. Often, such identity politics rest on processes of "*othering*", by which certain groups of inhabitants are either denied the full rights of citizens or are even de-legitimised as citizens of a particular state as such (e.g., the Rohingya of Myanmar). Interestingly, such strategies seem to be an integral part of the globally known repertoire of authoritarian regimes; they have been employed prominently by autocracies in regions as diverse as Arab Gulf countries and Latin American military dictatorships.

In a peculiar twist of that *topos* during the Syrian civil war, the regime published a video on YouTube[54] showing armed regime combatants who, while stepping over corpses, recognisably speak the dialect of the Alawi minority, to which President Bashar al-Assad belongs. The aim here was, of course, not to de-legitimise the Alawi community, but to incentivise the Alawi community's loyalty to the regime: In the regime's calculation, the Alawites' fears of reprisals if the regime falls should make them fight for regime survival along with the ruling elite. What this episode has in common with other types of identity politics is the deliberate and intentional instrumentalisation of ascriptive identities for political purposes of regime maintenance. In other words, activists face the dilemma that "the identity around which a movement is organised are [*sic*] also the basis for oppression" (Bernstein, 2005, p. 47). Moreover, movements or groups do not even need to be organised around such identities for regimes to play on the latter and mobilise for (or against) certain ethnic, religious or other status identities.

5.2.5 Political reform and political liberalisation

Whereas pressure for systemic change almost always arises "from below", "reform" always represents a "sovereign act" ("*hoheitlicher Akt*"; see Greven, 1978, p. 40) from above, and thus by definition cannot include a change of regime, nor is this ever the intent of reform.

53 There are a wide variety of understandings of the term across the social sciences. For an overview, see the review article by Bernstein (2005).

54 See https://youtu.be/_pf5kn-_6vY.

Rather, reforms can represent a "change *in* regime". Note, however, that only a small number of instances of the phenomenon of "reform" actually contain "changes in regime"; the majority of instances of the phenomenon of reform refer to changes in material policies that do not include any changes to the polity as such.

Reform as a phenomenon, thus, denotes any change inside a polity, and even when dubbed "*political* reform" it often refers to changes within the polity, but without altering the latter structurally. It may consist of changes in *policies* in one or more issue areas of *policy-making* that might impact on *political outputs and outcomes*; it may also consist of changes to the procedural rules of how daily *politics* are practiced in a certain realm, or even of changes within the polity proper, which, however, remains below the level of a change *of* regime, that is, the meta-rules of the political game.

"Reform" as a concept is generally *re*-active and not pro-active in nature. In autocracies, reform is usually sought when incumbent ruling elites are forced to – or otherwise feel they need to – *re*-act to domestic and/or international pressures. It aims at preserving the political status quo rather than at promoting fundamental, let alone revolutionary, change. In the words of Chinese President Xi: "Stability is the prerequisite for reform" (as quoted in The Economist 2013). As such, reform is inherently conservative rather than progressive, let alone revolutionary, in nature. As von Krockow (1976, p. 26) noted: "Reforms are only to be expected from the center, from the top – and can […] only originate from there." He considers it crucial that in any reform, the "legitimatory foundations of the existing order of political rule […] remains fully intact […]". In his reflections about theories of reform, Greven adds:

> Historically speaking, reform is a defensive and conservatory measure of those social forces or their agents who share political power, are interested in preserving it, and are positioned *against* a change of its legitimatory bases. The character of the political process of reform is the reform *law*, the *measure*, the *decree*, the *order* or the *granting* of rights. The dynamics of this process originate from the political power center from which the process of reform takes its departure […]. *It is the maintenance of this power center that is the goal of the change initiated by reform*. Reform, overall, is an act of sovereignty. (Greven, 1978, p. 39f.; emphasis in second-last sentence added)

Therefore, in engaging in reform, as in any other political decision, "the unobjectionable adage that autocrats pursue policies to maximize their survival" is still valid (Yom & Gause, 2012, p. 75). The goal of *political* reform from above, to leave no room for misunderstandings, is thus power maintenance and the avoidance of any transfer of power away from ruling elites. That aim is pursued by means of reform from above, but almost always by other available means as well. It is, in fact, extremely difficult to think of any case, globally as well as historically, in which incumbent rulers have given up political power voluntarily. We cannot assume, therefore, that this will happen, and reform, due to its innate conservative character and ambition, is certainly not a means to that end.

It is essential that any reformist policy innovation be scrutinised not only for its potential to make the polity more participatory, liberal or competitive. For "the adoption of democratic-looking elements like elections by dictatorships does not necessarily suggest an increase in the 'democraticness' of the regimes governing them" (Conroy-Krutz & Frantz, 2017, p. 9). Rather, the issue to be looked at when analysing such reform must be: What functions *other* than enhancing liberties, participation or contestation do such novel institutions and reforms

fulfil when they are initiated from above? The analysis, in short, must come from what there is (autocracy), and not from what donors wish the polity to move towards (democracy). A core analytical question in this regard is: What consequences do reforms actually bring about in terms of factual outcomes for the existing polity? The primary question by which to scrutinise reform policies must be about the extent to which such changes *in* regime contribute to overall regime maintenance. This is because reforms do not happen accidentally. They reflect intentional choices by incumbent rulers and their elites for the purpose of maintaining political power. Therefore, the question "*cui bono*?", or: "who benefits from reforms?" and: "In what ways do reforms initiated from above serve the survival of the incumbent regime?" needs to come first.

In many instances in which the outer appearance of newly founded institutions or procedures seems to signal, either by name or by the incorporation of new actors, that the purpose might have been to enhance or broaden political participation, the underlying goal is exactly the opposite. We must first assume that autocrats do not initiate reform without pressure, and second, that they would not initiate reform if chances were not high that these reforms could actually serve their purposes.

It is essential to understand that political reform needs to result in a re-distribution or sharing of central powers if it is to be meaningful with respect to the question of not making changes to *policies*, but rather to the *polity* as such. In simple words: "You cannot talk about a serious reform process if it does not result in power sharing" (Muasher, 2013).

Evidently, in order to know whether or not reforms result in a re-distribution of political power, it is essential to know where political power is located, or – in political science language, and building on the definition of "political regime" given above – where are the "centres of political power" located? This, too, might not be knowable by just looking at formal institutions, but it might require incorporating into the analysis the informal "networks of privilege" (Heydemann, 2004) that inform us about how a country "really works" (Ledeneva, 2006). For this reason, an intimate knowledge about both the polity in question and the "inhabitants" of the polity, the "politically relevant elites" (Perthes, 2004), is a fundamental prerequisite for the correct assessment of political change and for determining whether this alters the political regime or fosters it.

With regard to potential systemic change, the matter gets even more complicated when it comes to the authoritarian subtypes of personalist dictatorships (as opposed to military or single-party regimes, for instance): "Personalist dictatorships are the most likely of all authoritarian regimes to cling to power until the very end. […] They often have to be forced out of office as a result, and their exits are frequently violent" (Frantz, 2018, p. 141).

Political reform, then, is a means employed to ensure that the "centre of political power" (see Fishman's definition of "political regime" above), that is, the heart of political regime and its power structure, remains intact and is not altered. It is established knowledge today that the introduction of pseudo-democratic features into an existing authoritarian polity enhances the latter's prospects for survival: "Dictatorships with seemingly democratic institutions are more durable than their institution-free counterparts are", which is why "today's authoritarian regimes are particularly fond of incorporating institutions that seem democratic" (Frantz, 2018, p. 138). The literature has called this phenomenon "imitative institution-building" (Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004).

For more than a decade now, institutions that mimic the primary hallmarks of democracy (such as a multiparty systems, parliaments or elections) have been sufficiently unmasked as authoritarian in both their nature and functions.[55]

Since roughly the mid-2000s, autocrats in several world regions have entered a new round of such institution-building. What have been devised more recently are innovations that we may think of as "secondary features" in established democracies, but ones that still resonate positively in democratic ears and which at the same time look more modern, less boring and often also less controversial than primary formal democratic institutions: an ombudsperson; a youth parliament; a women parliamentarians' association; indigenous language clubs; an anti-corruption authority that is seemingly "independent" because it reports "only" to the prime minister or president; an expert committee composed of parts of civil society and parts of the state apparatus in order to facilitate "joint progress" in "national unity"; regime sponsorship of social entrepreneurs to serve the poor or handicapped or chronically ill; a one-stop shop for citizens' complaints; various e-government schemes that are portrayed as "bringing the state closer to the people" – all these are innovations that still bear the potential of receiving undue applause from Western donors, despite a bulk of literature that critically discusses such novelties, as well as their positive impact on authoritarian regime maintenance. Rather than being blindly applauded for their installation, this should serve as an alarm bell to the diligent observer. Although in some instances such measures actually do enhance services for the population, in many instances they do not. This should instruct Western policy-makers to more critically engage with the content and intentions of such reforms on a higher level of reflection than they are doing today.

The one field of reform that most directly seems to aim at changing the polity as such, and thus potentially the political regime – and which is therefore the strongest possible measure in the field of political reform that rulers can take – is a reform of the constitution itself, because constitutions lay out the rules of the political game as such. In this respect, what Ottaway and Dunne (2007, p. 2) wrote about Arab regimes a decade ago still holds today: "They all rewrite and amend their countries' constitutions with surprising frequency – without transferring any real power." In fact, this is a popular (and often necessary) step for authoritarianising regimes that undergo a reverse transition from democracy to authoritarianism. Once a majority is achieved by democratic means, both the constitution as well as crucial laws that regulate political participation, the organisation of the judiciary, the independence of the media and ownership structures in strategically important economic sectors are typically among the first targets of autocrats in the making.[56] Usually, changes are either cosmetic and aimed at more popular wording, or else this is combined with restrictions in content that refer the implementation of constitutional stipulations to

55 Groundbreaking is the institutionalist work by Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski in their many publications on the topic since 2006. Albrecht and Schlumberger (2004) first analysed this process for the MENA region.

56 See the section on "authoritarianisation" in Frantz (2018). Hungary under president Viktor Orbán may serve as an example here: Between 2010 and 2018, his government majority enacted no less than six reforms to the country's electoral laws.

subsequent laws to be adopted and which can then void any wording that would represent a departure from previous practices of their substance.[57]

Three core points about "reform initiated from above" need to be kept in mind and guide the analysis, from a political systems point of view, of political reform in authoritarian regimes. To sum up, reform initiated from above:

(1) is only one out of a larger variety of (typical) ways in which regimes react when they are challenged. Therefore, its meaning cannot be assessed by looking at individual reform measures in isolation from the general strategy by which a regime reacts to challenges and tries to maintain power;

(2) is not pro-active, but always re-active in nature (see discussion above);

(3) is limited by definition: Its aim is to limit and control change and prevent more fundamental change from happening, not to initiate or spur systemic change.

From a *systemic change perspective*, therefore, the question to ask is neither "What area does political reform take place in?" (judiciary, legislatures and parties, security sector, press and media, etc.) nor is it "To what extent does political reform result in a politically liberalised environment?" Such questions are in themselves misguided, as they will almost inevitably lead the analyst onto the wrong track of assuming that if only so-and-so-many reforms were undertaken, they would then somehow magically add up to systemic change. This, however, would represent, as outlined in Section 2, an analytical error in thinking that is incompatible with what we know about both systemic transitions and authoritarian resilience.

6 Conditions for authoritarian survival: Towards observable indicators (II)

"Any analysis of democratization should start with a focus on authoritarianism", write Conroy-Krutz and Frantz (2017, p. 8), and this was the focus of Section 5 above. While the push-factors towards democratisation have already been discussed in Part I, Sections 5 and 6 focus on some of the most important elements that have been seen to work as pull-factors in the direction of preventing systemic change rather than enabling it. It is therefore the goal of this section to carve out the key factors discussed in greater detail in the previous section and, mirroring what was done in Section 4 above for push-factors, establish guiding questions on pull-factors that work *against* systemic change. With no claim to exhaustiveness, it distils some guiding questions from the previous section that it is hoped will inform and orient empirical analyses on what dimensions to look at when analysing individual cases of political change.

57 Bahrain's abovementioned National Charter of 2001 that resulted in the 2002 constitution is a case in point, as is the more recent reform of the Moroccan constitution after the uprisings, but other examples abound.

6.1 Structural variables

6.1.1 The international sphere

Arguably, today there are decreasing chances that external actors of democracy promotion actually live up to what they claim to do, namely working towards the goal of democratisation. The guiding questions therefore are: Are there democracy promotion activities in the country? And if so: Do they aim at altering existing power constellations and at "taming" the authoritarian concentration of power in the regime elite's hands? What are the levels of aid granted for such purposes? What is the level of aid granted without political conditions for progress in human rights, pluralism and tolerance? What is the trendline in the Freedom House Index and the country score? How much democracy aid does the country receive overall, and how does that compare with other sectors or cross-cutting issues?

Authoritarian linkage and authoritarian learning have lately become much more intense, and thus both visible and prominent also in research. Therefore, some of the suggested questions guiding an analysis of that point in particular could be: Is there evidence of structured exchange, including exchange of sensitive information, between the regime and another autocracy? Is there cross-policing and/or cross-sanctioning, that is, an internationalisation of repression? Are there regular meetings in which regime elites meet with other authoritarian elites (for instance, the heads of police forces, the chiefs of staff of the armed forces, ministers of the interior or ministers of information, joint manoeuvres of the armed forces, etc.)? Can media from another autocracy be accessed in the given case?

6.1.2 The economic sphere

Economically stronger and more independent countries are less prone to international sanctioning and avoidance strategies by democracies. Also, the availability of rent income gives autocracies leeway at home, in that it can set the state above the local society and render it autonomous from the latter.

Guiding questions in this field are: What position does the case have in the global economy? Who are the main international (trading) partners? Is the country economically vulnerable or do other major powers depend on goods produced by it? Does the state earn significant (external) rent income or rent equivalents, measured as a percentage of exports, state income and GDP? In that case: What do patterns of rent distribution look like, and who benefits from this? To what extent is the state engaged in the alimentation of its society, and to what extent does it rely on extraction?

6.1.3 The nature of the political regime

The very nature of the political regime – or more precisely, the subtype of autocracy in place – has been found to impact the longevity of authoritarianism. In other words, the likelihood of transition to democracy has been found to depend on how power within the authoritarian regime is organised.

The following guiding questions can be suggested: What subtype of regime is in place in the case under investigation? To what degree is this type a case of personalist rule? Does a local strongman exist? How many years have the top power-holder and his predecessor been in office? If personalist: Is the regime in place neopatrimonial in nature? What do the de facto powers that are accumulated in the hands of top decision-makers (and potentially their families) consist of? Does that include formal or informal de facto control over the economic success of the most important private businesses?

6.1.4 State–society relations

Eckstein's "congruence theory" claims that when patterns of authority that prevail in society match with those along which the regime is organised and works, this leads to overall political stability. It is difficult to measure, in the absence of consensually agreed upon criteria, what constitutes such patterns of authority.

Nevertheless, some guiding questions for analysis could be: Do we see patriarchal relations governing interactions in society as well as within the state and its elites, or are they of a participatory nature? And are both, those in society and those among state elites, in line with one another or do they diverge? To what extent is society hierarchically organised, thus reflecting an authoritarian top-down pattern that is also prevalent in regime–society relations? Do promotions in everyday life follow the same logic as in the ruling party, the military, the judiciary and other core state institutions?

6.2 Actor-centred variables

On top of these four structural criteria, and as a second bloc of variables, come actor-centred factors that have been carved out in Section 5 above: the actions and reactions; the preferences, strategies and tactics that authoritarian actors deliberately and consciously pursue; as well as the nature of their interplay with societal forces that oppose them.

6.2.1 Repression and surveillance

First, repression remains one of the mainstays for authoritarian survival and a "pillar" of its stability. The routine presence of repression, whatever its form, intensity or targets, clearly indicates that democratisation has not occurred, as levels of repression are qualitatively lower to non-existent in that regime type.

Guiding questions might be: Is repression (physical or other types, but enacted on political grounds) a frequent or even routine feature of political life in the country? If repression exists: Who is targeted?

6.2.2 Patronage and co-optation

Second, informal patronage and distributional networks of rents can achieve the loyalty of strategically important social groups and individuals. Large-scale and broadly applied

subsidies can do the same for a larger share of the population. The informal politics of spoils that are distributed through patronage networks need to be analysed, not only in a dichotomous way of their presence or absence, but according to key target groups.

Questions for empirical investigations are: Do informal networks in politics and between political and economic or societal actors exist, and are there instances in which they dominate formal, but contradictory rules and regulations? To what extent do such networks and personal relationships dominate? Are public procurement procedures, privatisation processes, the handling of licences and fees, and the filling of senior public-sector positions, etc., transparent and equitable? If not: Who benefits? How can the relationship between public administration, top regime elites and large private business be characterised? Do public society figures need the approval of regime elites or are they appointed by them (heads of professional and other societal associations; important NGOs and charities; directors of opera houses, zoos, national museums, art galleries and theatres; university presidents; directors of large hospitals, etc.)? Are promotions and recruitment in the state institutions merit-based? Who is promoted and recruited? Generally speaking: Who benefits? How widespread are corruption and the evasion of direct taxes?

From there, a related set of questions is: Who is co-opted? Who owns major patronage networks and who are clients? What are the political and economic effects? To what extent do clientelist networks penetrate politics, society and civil society in particular, as well as the economy? What kinds of area-overlapping power networks are thus created? To what extent do societal forces, through such mechanisms, become an instrument for social control in the service of the ruling elites?

6.2.3 Management of opposition

Third, and in partial overlap with the second strategy of authoritarian regime maintenance, co-optation, the manipulation and "management" of political opposition can divide an otherwise challenging opposition, so that in the end the very presence and existence of an opposition serves the authoritarian status quo.[58] An "opposition group's inclusion or exclusion from the formal political sphere, and the structure of contestation within which a group acts, influences the incentives that the opponents face when deciding whether or not to challenge the incumbent elites" (Lust-Okar, 2005, p. 68). Numerous contributions to the debate have analysed "how opposition can support authoritarianism" (Albrecht, 2005), and also how regimes intentionally fragment, divide, weaken and exclude opponents through a wide range of more specific tools by which they determine the institutional rules of oppositional activity.

Questions for empirical analysis are: Does the legal framework allow for outlawing and defaming parts of the opposition in order to exclude them from the formal political arena? Does this actually happen, and are there important outlawed and excluded political forces?

58 Although "imitative institution-building" (see above) helps regimes in this process of managing the opposition, it goes beyond this dimension and falls short of capturing the whole of this opposition-management toolbox. Yet, there is no room here for details and in-depth discussions on the relationship between the two.

Are important individuals and segments of the population deliberately excluded from the formal political arena (such as e.g., parliament, higher bureaucracy, other positions of public influence)? Do oppositional forces experience restrictions in their use of the public sphere and in integrative mobilisation? Are the political structures of contestation unified or divided? Does the existing regulatory framework allow groups or individuals to found new political parties without the consent of the top regime elites? Do all political parties campaign for voters and exploit their full potential to mobilise voters during elections?

Consequently, regime-opposition constellations as well as the nature of the opposition to the regime itself need to be considered when making informed guesses about the likelihood of systemic political change. Likewise, the role of the regime is equally crucial: How do regime elites try to shape one oppositional group's relations vis-à-vis others, and vis-à-vis the ruling elites? What do the prevailing structures of contestation look like, and in what sphere does contestation take place (to the extent, of course, that this is permissible at all)? How do oppositional actors try to make use of whatever space is given to them? What is their respective strength? What is the quality and content of their demands? Do they regularly signal loyalty to the regime? How do oppositional groups behave towards each other? Is there an underground opposition?

6.2.4 Divisive politics along status identities

Fourth, sectarianisation and other forms of identity politics have seen a rapid rise in importance as a strategy of driving divisions not only within the opposition, but also society at large. "Identity politics" recently has not only become a buzzword as a danger to existing democracies in the West, chiefly due to popular books by, among others, Francis Fukuyama (2018) and Kwame Appiah (2018), but more importantly in the present context, it has also become increasingly important as an autocratic regime strategy for power maintenance, and has therefore, also recently, received more scholarly attention than in the past decades.

Regimes employ identity politics in order to gather and include who is considered loyal and bind such segments to the regime through various methods, all the while opponents to the regime are framed as the *other*, the enemy, the alien. The most prominent form of such othering processes in the form of exclusive identity politics is the instrumentalization of the Sunni–Shi'a divide in Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, but there are numerous other cleavages along ascriptive identity lines that regimes can and do (ab-)use in order to retain power.

Questions for empirical analysis are thus: Does the society in question have social cleavages that run along ascriptive status identities of religion, ethnicity, origin or tribe? Do such identity cleavages also reflect political identities or can they be made to look as if they did? Do regime elites – and if so in what particular ways and to what effect – engage in polarising public efforts at exploiting such identity lines to tie some groups more strongly to the regime and exclude, defame or discriminate others? Are discriminatory legal regulations and/or practices by the regime elites that are based on such ascriptive status identities already in place? Are incumbents successful in instrumentalising status identities? How do the thus "othered" react?

6.2.5 Political reform and liberalisation for regime maintenance

Fifth, political reform has been called, in Section 5.2.5 above, the single strongest instrument for authoritarian survival apart from repression, but also the most treacherous in the eyes of international observers: While reform always is a regime reaction (only the regime has the power to initiate and implement political reforms) to some perceived pressure (and as such is responsive), it also is always a means of engaging in *some* (controlled and controllable) change in order to avoid more substantial or radical change.

Questions that can guide empirical analyses for this dimension might be: Is there a reformist and regime-induced discourse in the country? Have political reforms actually taken place? If so, what are their declared policy goals as per the regime's official discourse? Have the laws and regulations regarding participation and competition changed over the past 15-30 years? Is there a recognisable trend?

As hinted to above, it is important to bear in mind that the guiding questions for analysis suggested here lay as little claim to exhaustiveness as do the dimensions that work as pull-factors for the survival of authoritarian regimes discussed in the previous section. Other points could be added, and as the literature on authoritarian survival is still very fluid, it is quite likely that we will need to add other dimensions in the future. Suffice it, therefore, to have made amenable for empirical analyses the most important variables, as dealt with in this section and the one that precedes it, even if not exhaustively.

I do claim, however, that in combination with Section 4 above, these variables provide empirical analysis with a rough handle to correctly and thoroughly assess political change between democratisation, reform, liberalisation, authoritarian upgrading and resilience. They not only allow us to distinguish systemic from non-systemic change, but also enable us to identify the trends of political change through a comprehensive look at both the factors that drive countries towards democratisation as well as the factors that prevent such dynamics and work in the opposite direction. For each of them, a number of structural and agent-related variables have been carved out that can inform empirical studies to ask the right relevant questions in order to make sense of political change that is observed in any given case.

Part III

MENA empirics and conclusions

The following Part III takes a first cursory look at the empirics of the MENA region as regards not the causes of uprisings, but rather regime reactions and the question of what type(s) of political change occurred in the aftermath of the mass protests that shook the region. Naturally, this cannot amount to individual case studies, even though developments within several specific countries are touched upon. Rather, the purpose of this part is to provide entry points for further case-specific analyses, which then will have to go into the details of how variables that are assumed to shape the nature of political change (democratisation vs. authoritarian resilience through re-calibrations of existing orders) have played out in concrete cases. Since the overall trend that dominates political regime developments in the MENA over the past decade has been authoritarian survival rather than democratisation, primary emphasis needs to be on those factors discussed in Part II (authoritarian resilience) rather than on those of Part I (democratisation theory) – even though there is a clear case of democratisation that requires elements of democratisation theory in order to arrive at plausible explanations.

While Section 7.1 gives a brief overview of events, Section 7.2 zooms in on intentional strategies of regime maintenance that have been observed in post-2011 Arab countries and discusses each of them separately with respect to the Arab MENA region. This focus on authoritarian resilience is further exemplified by a summary of what has been dubbed "the Arab monarchy debate", which is presented in Section 7.3 and represents a recent strand of literature in its own right. It asks why cases of regime breakdown as a consequence of the 2011 protests occurred only in republics, whereas none of the monarchies in that region faced any breakdown of the regimes in place before 2011. Finally, some remarks on the Tunisian democratisation process might provide first ideas about which explanatory variables carry more weight than others in order to explain why – among the many countries that witnessed regime-threatening mass protests – this one case democratised, whereas the others did not (Section 7.4).[59]

7 A first glance at empirics: Political dynamics in Arab countries, 2010-2020

With respect to the MENA region, the historical phase of "demo-crazy" scholarship (Valbjørn & Bank, 2010, p. 184) of the 1990s and early 2000s has ended. The more recent literature is not only looking for factors that might make democratisation occur or seem more likely, and thereby replicate instances of "searching where the light shines" (Anderson, 2006).[60] It also examines both structural factors and actors' behaviour and measures that are purposefully enacted and implemented in pursuit of the overriding goal

59 To be sure, this chapter is deficient insofar as it does not aim at covering all empirical consequences of the 2011 uprisings; as hinted to before, cases of regime breakdown with subsequent breakdown of the central state and its core functions are beyond the scope of this paper.

60 This refers to the title of a review article by Lisa Anderson, former president of the American University in Cairo and Dean at Columbia University New York, who famously compared two decades of research about Middle Eastern democratisation with the drunken man who realises he lost his keys when coming home. Rather than searching for them on that side of the street where he walked, he searches on the opposite side, and when asked by a helpful passer-by why he did not look for his keys where he had actually been, but in places he had not walked at all, the drunkard's reply is: "Because this is where the street lantern shines, and where the search is therefore easier."

of *avoiding* democratisation. The goal of this literature is thus to learn how to better understand the functional logic of the authoritarian systems in place and the resilience that characterises them.

7.1 Short empirical overview

This quick look at the nature and demands of the massive protests of 2011 as well as their results is to lay the groundwork for a first and cursory, non-exhaustive glance into the empirics of the MENA region. In that respect, it comes as no surprise that reform (and political reform more specifically) represents one such prominent reaction to the protests by regime elites.

Albeit more prominent in some countries than in others, almost all countries of the Arab Middle East were hit in 2010/11 by a wave of mass protests of disenchanted citizens complaining about their rulers. The key contents of their dissatisfaction are symbolically captured by the slogans shouted, in various variants, by Egyptian and Tunisian protesters during the uprisings. Protests were (a) about a lack of bread (Egyptian dialect: *'aish*), signalling the economic or welfare dimension of protests, (b) about a lack of freedom (Arabic: *hurriya*), signalling the political nature of the protests and (c) about lacking the possibility to lead a life with human dignity (Arabic: *karama insaniyya*), which hints to various inhumane actions committed by incumbent regimes as well as foregone developments, the lack of prospects and chances for a good life, and, most importantly, social justice (Arabic: *'adala ijtima'iyya*).

Bread riots that include socio-economic demands have been numerous in the MENA region ever since the 1970s (e.g., Egypt: 1977, 1984; Morocco: 1981, 1984; Jordan: 1989, 1996; Lebanon: 1987; Algeria: 1988, etc.). These riots have mainly been a critique of neoliberal adjustment policies, as octroyed by the international financial institutions and, in rather perverted fashion, implemented by autocrats in the region. In that sense, they can be said to have re-occurred because the socio-economic situation has remained structurally flawed since then. But in contrast to such food riots, another issue raised by protesters – and for the first time in decades – included explicit political demands, which, at least in some cases, amounted to a de-legitimation of incumbents. Thereby, "non-regime actors today have managed, for the first time since the 1950s, to establish a counter-hegemonic discourse that is explicitly directed against incumbents" (Schlumberger, 2010, p. 249). Regimes that are perceived as denying citizens basic rights and freedoms while at the same time not offering minimal welfare services and being deeply unjust have lost their domestic legitimacy on virtually all accounts.

Three major gaps thus exist in which Arab regimes had "failed to deliver": The developmental deficits in the Arab world; the consistent lack even of development-*orientation* in governmental policies in that region; the lack of political freedoms, opportunities to partake in public affairs and accountability of rulers; as well as increasing degrees of social injustice, as exemplified by a very visible, small stratum of super-rich; alongside declining living standards, increasing levels of unemployment and poverty, have been (and continue to be) legend. In all these areas, Arab regimes have failed to meet even minimal expectations and ambitions of their young and fast-growing populations, and which crystallised so neatly in the buzzwords of protesters. The associated grievances, thus, were

no surprise when the uprisings started in 2011. What was genuinely new was the decidedly political direction that protests took in 2011. "Get lost!" (*irhal*) and "the people want the fall of the regime" (*ash-sha'b yurid isqat an-nisam*) were the popular slogans that originated in Tunisia but soon spread to Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria and eventually also Jordan.[61]

The Arab uprisings resulted in three key structural outcomes that can be distinguished. First, a majority of the political regimes survived intact and embarked on an authoritarian re-calibration and re-consolidation (Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan and all of the Gulf monarchies plus Iran). Second, several regimes collapsed and saw not only regimes break down, but the very states themselves erode. This concerns a minority of cases (Libya, Yemen). Syria and potentially Bahrain would have to be added to these cases were it not for international military interventions that helped the rulers to survive in office and at least partially re-consolidate (even though several core functions of statehood have temporarily broken down in Syria and have not yet been fully re-established).

The third outcome concerns the exceptional case of Tunisia, where we saw a process of systemic political change towards democratisation that has, however, not reached any "point of no return" (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986).[62] For this one case in which systemic change has actually taken place, the question as to whether or not the newly established democratic regime will be able to consolidate as an "embedded democracy" in the longer run (Merkel, 2004) remains unanswered, as the challenges are numerous and significant.

As this brief assessment of outcomes demonstrates, ruling autocrats have in no case been willing to cede or even share power voluntarily. They were more willing to accept the prospect of state collapse if the choice was sharing power with their opponents, as the examples of Syria, Libya, Yemen and likely also Bahrain demonstrate. In this light, conflict about political power is invariably a zero-sum game, which, for some in this scenario, had turned into an endgame, often about life and death, as in Colonel Ghaddafi's case. This is in line with the global empirical observation that political regime elites, as a rule, do not exit power voluntarily in non-democracies.

7.2 Strategies of regime maintenance

As outlined above, rather than going through all factors or variables that possibly play a role in assessing the nature and degree of political change in the post-2011 MENA region, this section deliberately emphasises the often-misread strategies for authoritarian regime maintenance employed by their leaders. Although such techniques differ from one case to the next depending on the context in which they are employed, as well as the degree to which each technique is present, they do not differ qualitatively in their nature across the region, nor with regard to the form of autocracy (whether monarchy or republic), thereby

61 As in Morocco, the Jordanian version of the chant initially was "The people want a reform of the system" (*ash-sha'b yurid islah an-nizam*), but later, in November 2012, it turned to the initial variant after a hike in fuel prices.

62 Whether any such point exists at all is of course highly doubtful, but the point here is that no matter how we define "consolidation", Tunisia has not consolidated by any definition. For more on Tunisia, see Section 7.4 below.

making a broad generalisation possible – all the while this paper of course acknowledges, as already hinted to on various occasions above, that by doing so in a macro-analytical fashion, micro-level differences get lost through the broad brush applied here. However, it is the *underlying logic* of such measures that will enable the reader to understand the nature of political change, rather than the country-specific details of the individual application of techniques of "authoritarian upgrading".

7.2.1 Increased repression

Repression – understood as the absence or constriction of basic political rights and civil liberties – as a tendency increased rather than decreased in the MENA region after the Arab uprisings.

Astonishingly, Egypt almost managed to retain its (still solidly authoritarian) score of 5.5 and only slid down to 6 in the Freedom House Index. Yet, it arguably represents one of the most drastic examples of increased repression in the region – apart from Syria, that is. From the military's coup in July 2013, which resulted in General Sisi assuming the presidency, until spring 2017, the number of "forced disappearances" had exceeded 60,000 according to human rights organisations (in Syria, the number of forced disappearances since 2011 is more than 80,000; see Amnesty International, 2018), and the United Nations (UN) conclude that "torture is a systematic practice in Egypt" (United Nations General Assembly, 2017, p. 14). Constraints on the freedom of the media rank Egypt lower than Russia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Turkey (the latter infamously boasts the largest number of detained journalists worldwide; Reporters without Borders, 2018). General Sisi presided over one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history.[63] Human Rights Watch reports the National Security Agency (despite its renaming locally, it is still known as *amn ad-dawla*) as representing "the heart of state terror" (Human Rights Watch, 2017, p. 14) – a characterisation that is more commonly expected of totalitarian than authoritarian regimes such as Egypt. But with regard to the systematic employment of state terror, Egypt, since 2013, has resembled a totalitarian regime more than an authoritarian one.

Apart from this singled-out illustration, however, other data confirm the trend. Numbers do not, of course, give us any insights into the hows and whys of repression. Coming to a better understanding of the motives, logic, types, levels and effects of repression is the goal of a new literature that started to emerge roughly a decade ago (e.g., Davenport, 2007a), and which also features contributions on the Middle East (e.g., Josua & Edel, 2015).

Nevertheless, a quick comparison of the scores that the region attains in the annual Freedom House ratings supports the literature reporting increasing levels of repression in those countries that experienced protests. Juxtaposing the combined average figures for 2010 (the year before the uprisings) and 2017 shows a downward trend in the degree to which basic

63 This occurred at Rab'a Adawiya Mosque in August 2013, with a total of more than 900 casualties on that day alone.

rights and liberties exist in the MENA region, down from 5.73 to 6.0.[64] If we take democratised Tunisia out of the picture, the trend is even clearer, with scores for basic rights and freedoms falling from 5.71 to 6.22. This trend is also confirmed if we isolate those five countries that have been hit hardest by the Arab uprisings and have not undergone transition (Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen and Libya): Here, the combined average score for civil liberties and political rights has declined as much as the regional average, down from 6 to 6.5. At the same time, this demonstrates that the phenomenon is region-wide and not restricted to the regimes where protests were most vibrant.[65]

Morocco – arguably among the least illiberal Arab countries – is a point in case where in the post-2011 period, incarceration has frequently occurred on the basis of what the literature calls "juridical repression" (i.e., judicially "legitimised" denial of rights for de facto political reasons). As in other countries inside and outside the MENA region, this strategy most often takes the form of false allegations for crimes other than the one for which the jailed person is sentenced. A critical journalist might be handed down a multi-year imprisonment sentence and know precisely what it is for, even though the accusation might be tax evasion, illegal abortion or any other non-political issue that may or may not be correct. The point is that the sentences are based on allegations that do not reflect the political reasons behind them.[66] Although "soft repression" – in the sense of a denial of basic civic rights – has existed in Morocco for a long time, this intensified after 2011. Opponents to the regime or activists who demand a constitutionalisation of the monarchy are not free from intimidation and threats to themselves and their families, and international players such as the EU stand by for the sake of maintaining smooth relations with incumbents.[67]

Intimidation, censorship, travel bans, harassment, arrests, unlimited pre-trial detentions – and in the not so liberal countries of the region also routine infringements of the physical integrity of dissidents and their families through torture, forced disappearances and killings, often in the form of collective punishment – shape the picture of Arab regimes more today than they did before 2011. The general trend is: The region has become even more

64 A score of 7 refers to a near-complete absence of basic political rights and civil liberties, like in closed systems such as Saudi Arabia and North Korea, and 1 characterises regimes such as those of Norway, Sweden and Finland. The above calculations include Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey. The West Bank and Gaza have been taken out of this calculation because (a) the Palestinian territories are politically structurally different from the other Arab states, and thus hardly comparable in terms of regime type, and because (b) the Palestinian government is not autonomous in crucial policy-making areas so that a comparison makes little sense.

65 Note that the countries where uprisings were strongest also scored lower on these essential democratic rights than the average when protests began.

66 In this respect, then, it is obviously hypocritical to call Morocco a "safe country of origin" on the basis that there were no political prisoners. There are, but the regime's practice conceals that fact and thereby makes it easier for European politicians to refer instead to the paper than to the practice in their efforts at handling what they placate as a "refugee crisis".

67 For instance, the EU ambassador to Morocco, in 2011, reportedly held a meeting with representatives of all civil society groups that received EU financial support at the time and bluntly let them know that their relations to the EU along with the latter's support would be stopped if they were part of the 20th February movement (interviews in Rabat, spring/summer 2013).

repressive, rather than more liberal, in the post-2011 period. It is noteworthy that there is no exception to this trend apart from democratised Tunisia.[68]

7.2.2 A new round of co-optation, patronage and buying off dissent

There is no Arab regime that has not tried, in the wake of mass dissatisfaction during the past decades, to counter protests by offering material concessions to its population. Sometimes these were more targeted than in other instances, but all have embarked on massive, albeit short-term, social spending. The sheer amount of financial resources that has been committed and spent on such reactions across the MENA region is as impressive as the immediacy by which ruling elites have resorted to that instrument.

Also taking into account the long history of "benevolent" autocracy in the Arab world (first: Pawelka, 1985, p. 22ff.), it is even less surprising that regimes embarked on a renewed cycle of co-optation and efforts at buying off dissent. The massive importance of rent, both differential-economic and political rent-equivalents, has long been used for both the targeted alimentation of strategically important elites as well as the distribution of welfare among the broader population (see e.g. Luciani, 1987; Pawelka, 1993; Schlumberger, 2006b; among others).[69] This is facilitated by, first, the massive amounts of hydrocarbons in the MENA region,[70] the export earnings of which have not only benefitted the oil-rich states in the Persian Gulf but, through intra-regional capital transfers, also the oil-poor Arab countries (see Korany, 1986). Second, such co-optation and alimentation is facilitated by the prevailing subtype of authoritarian regimes (neopatrimonialism) in which informal patronage networks run from the highest to the lowest echelons of the state administration as well as through society at large.

Secondly, in 2011 and since then, the oil-rich Gulf monarchies have vied to again commit – and in part actually transfer – substantial resources to the non-oil countries, thereby replicating earlier patterns of regional stabilisation. Of course, this was also meant to strengthen counter-revolutionary forces in recipient countries and to help like-minded dictators remain in power.[71]

Within just a few months, almost all Arab regimes pledged to dole out massive material benefits to their populations – to society at large as well as targeting segments of the population that incumbents perceived as being crucial for maintaining state power (such as

68 The very modest improvement in Jordan's political rights score that Freedom House accords the country comes as a result of its 2016 constitutional reform. On this matter, see more below.

69 Usually in the form of subsidies on basic foodstuffs and consumer goods (fuel, rice, oil, tea, bread, sugar, etc.).

70 The MENA region boasts almost two-thirds of the world's proven oil and gas reserves.

71 The best-known example is probably Saudi Arabia's 2011 pledge to make up for potential losses Egypt might have incurred if the US administration of Barack Obama had withheld their annual ca. USD 1.5 billion payments to the Egyptian military, as it had threatened – in vain. Saudi Arabia's answer to the US announcement of a potential halt to these aid payments came within hours.

public servants, the military, security services and top-level bureaucrats). A cursory look across the region forcefully demonstrates this and leaves no doubt.[72]

7.2.3 Manipulation of opposition

Sometimes during crises such as the Arab uprisings, however, oppositional demands arise that antagonise the regime and its elites rather than remaining the kind of subservient opposition that bolsters the regime by playing according to its rules. One particular way of coping with that type of challenge has been the initiation of a "political dialogue" with opponents. Several regimes (such as Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain and others) have initiated – as a means of stopping street protests and fencing off oppositional activities – dialogue schemes that are meant to direct communication from confrontations in the streets to the negotiation tables inside. Such

72 *Jordan* raised salaries in the public sector and created more than 20,000 new positions (6,000 of which in the police apparatus); it decreased taxes on fuel and basic foodstuffs and provided new loans for developmental and housing projects in poor and politically important areas of the country. *Morocco* raised food subsidies by almost 90 per cent. Pensions, salaries and the minimum wage saw an equal increase and thousands of new jobs were provided in the public sector. *Algeria* lowered taxes and duties on sugar and edible oil; employees in the judiciary suddenly earned more than twice their previous incomes, university professors four times as much as before the protests, in addition to a USD 20 billion dollar social programme to provide assistance to the unemployed, and interest-free loans. *Syria* raised public-sector salaries by 20-30 per cent, increased subsidies on heating costs by more than 70 per cent, and provided almost USD 200 million for poverty reduction, apart from lowering taxes on coffee and sugar and import duties on other foodstuffs. *Yemen's* former president Ali Abdullah Saleh abolished tuition fees for university students and promised 60,000 new jobs in the public sector as well as a 50 per cent reduction in income taxes. He also raised public-sector salaries, including of the military, by 25 per cent and increased food subsidies. Libya's former ruler Muammar Ghaddafi abolished all taxes on duties on a range of foodstuffs and announced public-sector salary increases of up to 150 per cent, as well as a one-off payment of USD 450 to every family. In *Egypt*, Hosni Mubarak, while still in office, offered to stop any cuts in subsidies. The military government in place after his ouster, confronted with continued protests, promised to tenure almost half a million limited-term contracts in the public sector and to stop all privatisations. This came along with a 15 per cent increase in all public-sector salaries and a 25 per cent increase in subsidies in the state's 2011/12 budget. But all this is dwarfed by the massive spending policies that the oil-rich Gulf monarchies embarked on. *Saudi Arabia* created 60,000 new positions in the security sector and, in February 2011, initiated a USD 35 billion package to turn 180,000 limited-term contracts into permanent ones, to raise public salaries by 15 per cent, provide more than 140,000 construction loans and increase the number of family members eligible for social assistance from eight to fifteen. In March 2011, an additional package worth USD 67 billion followed that enabled the regime to make special payments to state employees, support religious organisations that had denounced demonstrations against the regime and raise the minimum wage. *Kuwait* chose direct payments of USD 2,500 to each family, raised salaries in the oil industry by 66 per cent, and distributed foodstuffs for free for a period of 14 months, inter alia. *Bahrain's* regime also "bought" consent through one-off direct payments (of USD 2,500 per family) and created 20,000 new jobs (in the ministry of interior!). It installed a debt-forgiveness programme for debts in the state's housing programme and invested USD 100 million to reduce the costs of food as well as another USD 165 million to combat poverty. *Oman* provided 50,000 new public-sector jobs and raised unemployment assistance and minimum wages. In the *UAE* and *Qatar*, where public-sector employment accounts for more than 80 per cent of the workforce, all salaries and pensions were raised by 60 to 120 (for officers) per cent (Qatar) and 35 to 100 per cent (UAE), respectively, in addition to a USD 2.7 billion scheme of loan financing for low-income groups. In addition, the GCC pledged USD 10 billion aid packages to both Bahrain and Oman, mainly for housing programmes. The above examples are all taken from Matzke (2012, p. 60f.)

schemes are not in themselves new. They are actually quite frequent, inside the MENA region and beyond, in times of crises in authoritarian regimes. They also have important precursors within the region.[73]

Such dialogue strategies – as reactions to mass uprisings and acute dangers for regime maintenance – can take different forms. The first is a meaningful dialogue that includes regime, opposition and at times even anti-systemic actors; in the context of the so-called Arab Spring, this type of process is exemplified by the UN-brokered and -moderated "National Dialogue Conference" (*mu'tamar al-hiwar al-watani*) in Yemen.[74] The second type of "dialogue" is often geared towards external Western audiences and is not necessarily about enhancing communication, let alone establishing participation or political rights domestically. An example of this second type is the "national dialogue" in Bahrain.

Box 2: Deceiving the opposition in Bahrain

The "national dialogue" was instigated in 2011 by King Hamad of Bahrain to promote reform. Initially, the king had nourished hopes that the opposition's demand to talk directly to either the king or to crown prince Salman would be met. But the crown prince soon mandated the speaker of the Shura Council, Khalifa Al Dhahrani, to run this process. Although Dhahrani himself had no executive power, interestingly, he was the architect, in 2001, of the "National Action Charter", which was then approved by referendum with a majority of more than 98 per cent and which had put an end to an earlier series of political unrest in the country.[75] After initial agreement to participate, the by far largest political movement in the country, *Al-Wifaq*, withdrew from the talks several times, and the process was officially suspended in 2014 by the government.[76] At no point had there been any intent to negotiate any power-sharing agreement, or even the question of expanding political participation or the inclusiveness of the existing system on the part of the regime. To no one's surprise, therefore, this process ended in the sand and left Bahrain back at the *status quo ante* with massive societal conflicts and polarising identity policies (more on this below) pursued by the regime through the discrimination of its Shi'a societal majority, and its opponents more generally. The result is usually frustration on the side of regime opponents and the comprehension that negotiating with regime forces does not lead to demands being met. The reason is that "National Dialogues […] are often 'the continuation of conflict by other means.' They may be neither national nor dialogical".

Source: Berghof Foundation and Federal Foreign Office (2017, p. 178)

But why, then, did the Bahraini regime embark on such a process at all if, from the outset, it was not meant to re-distribute power or make substantial concessions? There are at least two dimensions that the answer to this question includes. First, it was meant to signal to

73 One prominent historical example is the inclusive process towards the Jordanian "National Accord" (*al-mithaq al-watani*) in 1989, which enabled the regime to adopt a new constitution with a comparatively high degree of legitimacy and hardly any resistance; another such case is the Algerian "*concorde civile*", which ended the civil war, as well as a more recent one in that country that came ahead of the 2019 presidential elections after protesters had demanded that President Abdelaziz Bouteflika step down from office.

74 Note, however, that this form of dialogue could only be organised in Yemen after former president and long-time dictator Ali Saleh had fled the country.

75 This subsequently enabled the king to proclaim a new constitution in 2002, which greatly curtailed parliamentary powers. After initially boycotting the elections of 2002, the country's largest opposition group, Al-Wifaq, later gave up their boycott and participated in the 2006 elections – a major victory for the palace.

76 Within a year's time, the participants had been unable to arrive at even a joint agenda.

protesters that the regime was ready to negotiate about truly political issues with them and other non-regime forces.[77] Second, it signals to the outside world the civility of a regime that had asked its neighbours to militarily support a crackdown on its opposition. "We do not (always) rule by brute force (only), but we engage in dialogue and negotiate even with our opponents" is the message to the outside world, and to Western liberal democracies in particular.

Thus, while the process of authoritarian management and manipulation of oppositional forces has been complex, in particular post-2011, up to now it has not appeared to be a particularly risky path for Arab incumbents to take: If regimes have fallen, they have fallen despite reform and other manipulative tactics, not because of them, as Yom's analysis demonstrates with the help of the Jordanian and Moroccan examples and the crowns' handling of the electoral process:

> Since the Arab uprisings, the kings of Morocco and Jordan have welcomed electoral contestation. They want opposition forces to catapult into prominence via elections that are free of systematic fraud and defensible as democratic. But the elections are a trap: Rules and institutions are stacked to make oppositionists flounder and look bad. The idea is to expose them as such huge failures that the public will inevitably look to the throne as the sole force capable of handling power responsibly and effectively. (Yom, 2017, p. 137)

In both cases, thus, "elections are being used to show that the politicians who emerge from them cannot be entrusted with the power to govern. By default, that leaves the palaces firmly in charge" (Yom, 2017, p. 139). For Morocco, Yom concludes that "the regime is best served if the [Party of Justice and Development] remains active so that the authoritarian ecology of legal constrictions and political traps in which it is forced to operate can slowly consume it" (Yom, 2017, p. 139).

7.2.4 Intensification of identity politics

During and after the Arab Spring, regimes have actively engaged in efforts at polarising their opponents along ascriptive, primordial lines.[78] In essence, the practice of identity politics in the MENA region is about the

> reinvention of sectarian, tribal, or ethnic identities [that] are not rooted in pre-modern primordial and immutable cultural affinities. It is rather the consequence of the post-uprising erosion of coercive, institutional, and ideological power in a number of countries with plural societies, and the deployment by domestic and regional actors of sectarianism to defend their authoritarian orders against local rivals or as a fig leaf for otherwise geopolitical battles. (Salloukh, 2015)

77 This, of course, does not mean that the regime, at any point, was ready for such negotiations, but signalling such readiness can be legitimising in the short run and, in the calculation of rulers, helps to calm an acutely tense situation of crisis.

78 As in other parts of the world, this is made relatively easy in the MENA region, as most societies, due to their colonial history, have arbitrarily drawn national borders where borders do not coincide with the "nation" as a cultural construct or with the settlement areas of particular tribes, adherents of religions and so forth.

In other words, it is a deliberately used strategy to exclude and marginalise opponents, and it often has the purpose of silencing and defaming political opposition, but also entire social groups even beyond their activists. Thus, although a heterogeneity of identities has always existed, it is their intentional instrumentalization for the purpose of regime maintenance that such strategies consist of. The literature on Middle East politics routinely calls them "sectarianisation", which in its turn forms part of the larger field of "identity politics".

That strategy has been employed most prominently in the Arab Gulf countries with significant Shi'a minorities and even majorities, but where rulers belong to the Sunni Islamic community.[79] Saudi Arabia with its Shiite opposition as well as Bahrain with its Shiite population majority are the primary cases, although there is also substantial work on the Iraqi case (some titles are in the previous footnote). In Bahrain, for instance, the regime largely managed to invent an internationally successful narrative by portraying its anti-regime protests as purely sectarian in nature, even though the opposition explicitly aimed at building cross-cleavage coalitions and only later became truly sectarian after the regime warned Sunni opponents to not side with Shi'i dissenters.

But far from being restricted to the Gulf, regime-fuelled sectarianism as an instrument for popular mobilisation, exclusion and forcing subjects into regime loyalty has also been recorded in other countries, for instance in Syria (see e.g. Philipps, 2015).[80] In sum,

> the greatest responsibility for sectarianizing the conflict lies with the regime. Bashar al-Assad used excessive violence against the peaceful opposition seemingly to provoke them into a war that his better-armed military would probably win. This required retaining sufficient support to avoid the regime implosion seen in Egypt, and sectarian identities were manipulated to achieve this. (Philipps, 2015, p. 369)

Analysing the reasons for the recent tangible surge in sectarian violence throughout the region, Byman writes that "much of it is a bitter by-product of the Arab Spring" (Byman, 2014, p. 79). He continues: "Regimes […] play sectarian cards to shore up popular support and discredit their rivals" (Byman, 2014, p. 79). Pre-existing societal cleavages that are related to primary identity markers lend themselves easily to an instrumentalization of

79 There is a broader literature on the issue. See i.a. Gengler (2013); the various contributions to Lynch (2016); Matthiesen (2013, 2015); Salloukh (2017). Although these authors agree on the above origins of a post-uprising surge in sectarianism for instrumental purposes, there also is a minority position that views this surge as being the result of an essential, age-old divide in the region that goes back to the early days of Islam and relegates political factors to the background (for an example, see Abdo, 2017). Such mainly primordialist accounts of the phenomenon are popular among policy circles, but they have gained little analytical support in academia. This is in part because they fail to explain other types of identity politics that are, for instance, based on ethnic cleavages or on religious cleavages other than the Sunni-Shi'a divide. They also cannot explain why we see the current surge right after the Arab mass uprisings, and why this is originating chiefly from political regime elites themselves. "Be it in Bahrain, Lebanon, or Iraq, sectarian mobilization in the modern period has been more concerned with access to political and economic rights within the framework of the nation-state, rather than with the validation of religious truths" (Salloukh, 2017).

80 One infamous instance that has already been hinted to above in Section 5.5 was when Maher al-Assad, the president's younger brother and commander of special units, filmed atrocities being committed by Alawi agents who are talking in their easily recognisable dialect. A video of the crimes committed was later posted on the web with the obvious purpose of instilling fear of revenge within the Alawi community in case they defected and the regime was defeated.

regime maintenance in times of crisis. Whether it is Copts in Egypt, the rift between Jordanians of Palestinian vs. those of Trans-Jordanian origin, whether Alawites, Christians, Shi'is and Druze vs. Sunnis in Syria, or Sunnis vs. Shi'is in much of the Gulf: The concrete form that regime-initiated identity politics takes depends on the local context. But playing the identity card has become a popular strategy throughout the region with dictators who are struggling for survival.

Observers therefore need to be conscious of the fact that this is a permanent temptation for incumbent rulers. This also is a particularly dangerous strategy, as it often involves direct violence or the incitement of violence and hate, which has potentially long-term negative repercussions for social peace. As Salloukh (2015) concludes, "democratic and decentralized political orders may be the only antidote to the death and destruction visited upon many Arab states since the explosion of the popular uprisings."

7.2.5 Political reform

As has been illustrated above, political reform in authoritarian regimes is generally a means employed to keep the "centre of political power" – that is, the incumbent elite's power structure – intact and to maintain existing power relations as well as the regime elites' privileges.

It is therefore important to look at what exactly is reformed in what ways, and what the actual empirical effects of such reforms are. Too often, observers content themselves with looking at the reform measures instead of looking at the results of their implementation – if they are implemented, that is, as some reforms are meant to exist on paper only and not to be actually implemented. Reforms conducted under conditions of authoritarianism, as has been seen, are an integral element of authoritarian strategies of regime maintenance, despite all the politically motivated narratives to the contrary that have been propagated by incumbent autocrats, but also international donors. Such narratives are almost always false. They deflect from the fact that incumbents have been (and still are) actively engaged in the construction of what has been called "imitative institutions" (Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004, p. 380ff.) and similar reforms. Whether it is the establishment of political parties (Morocco), installing or revitalising parliaments or similar bodies (most Gulf countries), the initiation of "national dialogues" (Bahrain, Jordan) or holding referenda that, in democratic contexts, are considered elements of direct democracy, whether it is the initiation of "youth parliaments" (Morocco), constitutional changes (Morocco, Jordan), electoral reforms or decentralisation schemes (Kuwait, Yemen, Egypt, Jordan): All of these are "imitative institutions" that have been fostered by political reform over the past three decades. Such institutions and processes fulfil purposes entirely different from the ones in democratic environments from which their names usually originate, and the overriding goal is to enhance autocratic survival in office (see also Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006; Heydemann, 2007; Yom, 2013, 2017, 2018). Also note that, as this paragraph demonstrates, employing strategies of political reform for the sake of authoritarian survival is nothing new to the MENA region and was not invented after 2011.

In fact, apart from repression, political liberalisation through reform from above has probably been *the* single most important political instrument in the toolbox of dictators to avoid transition. Even regimes as closed as the one in Saudi Arabia – on a par with North

Korea in terms of restrictions on civil liberties and political rights – have been consistently portrayed as major "reformers" for many decades (see Al-Arian, 2017). The current Saudi crown prince thus follows, with contracted advice from Western public relations (PR) firms, a long- and well-established pattern. Being a "reformer" has thus become a synonym for being resistant to systemic change. This is why Daniel Brumberg, when he wrote about perspectives of such systemic change in the MENA region almost 20 years ago, identified political liberalisation in autocracies not as progress, but as a "trap" (Brumberg, 2002).

For the MENA region, it is particularly interesting that Marwan Muasher, a former core elite member of one of the Arab autocracies, has confirmed exactly this. It is a very rare case in which an individual who has been part of the ruling establishment of an Arab autocracy explicitly addresses the ruling strategies of exactly those elites. Former Jordanian deputy prime minister for government reform (!), foreign minister, senator, and World Bank vice president Muasher refers specifically to "the rich monarchies of the Arab Gulf and the poor monarchies of Jordan and Morocco" when he clarifies that

> none of these countries, I repeat: *none* of these countries are setting themselves on a course of serious reform. The approach so far has been to offer cosmetic reform; reform that does not really result in a serious reform, […] hoping that the people in those countries would look at the countries around them and would get scared […] and would no longer call for reform measures in their [own] countries. (Muasher, 2013)

Not surprisingly, regime elites, including those at top levels, make use of professional advice in the framing and publicising of such reform measures. This has been evidenced, for example, by the correspondence of Washington-based international lobbying firm Brown Lloyd James with the Syrian government in 2011 after the outbreak of protests there, when the former advised Syria to better emphasise reform in its public relations.[81]

Importantly, ruling autocrats usually have access to much better and more professional external advice than do political leaders in democracies because of (a) the lack of accountability (resources spent need not be justified in front of a parliament since the executive dominates), and (b) resources are highly concentrated in the hands of the ruler/ the ruling elite. Both reasons mean that authoritarian rulers have a significant advantage over democratic leaders in their access to professional political engineers, spin doctors and PR firms. We must therefore work with the hypothesis that autocrats have an information advantage and are structurally better able to correctly assess the consequences of political reforms and other changes they initiate than are democratic leaders.

It is noteworthy that 2011 marks no watershed in this regard. Strategies of regime maintenance, including the nature of limited political reforms, were not fundamentally altered after the Arab uprisings of 2011, but essentially leaders trusted what had been tried and tested in the past. Much of this has already been analysed by, first, Albrecht and Schlumberger (2004) and Heydemann (2007), and by countless other academic contributions afterwards.

81 "[S]oft power is needed to reassure the Syrian people and outside audiences that reform is proceeding apace, legitimate grievances are being addressed and taken seriously, and that Syria's actions are ultimately aimed at creating an environment in which change and progress can take place", Brown Lloyd James partner Holtzman wrote to an official at the Ministry of Presidential Affairs, and "refocusing the perception of outsiders and Syrians on reform will provide political cover to the generally sympathetic US Government, and will delegitimize critics at home and abroad" (Rogin, 2012).

For the majority of Arab regimes, the strategies sketched out above have been sufficient to reach a re-calibration following challenges. Morocco is a case in point, not only in the post-2011 period, but well before:

> Power in Morocco is still where it has always been, firmly in the hands of the king or, more broadly, the palace. The reform process in Morocco is not meant to lead to democracy […]. Morocco thus illustrates both the possibilities and the limits of managed substantive reform. (Ottaway & Dunne, 2007 p. 10)

The success of such strategies is mostly due to the smart combination of, first, heightened levels of intimidation and repression of opponents in times of perceived crises or challenges; second, complex strategies for the manipulation of oppositional forces through a mix of co-optation, fragmentation, in- and exclusion, as well as, third, a well-publicised agenda of political reform.

7.3 An exemplification from the literature: The "Arab monarchy debate"

Because of their – in regional comparison – relatively higher degrees of pluralist politics and the lower levels of open repression, countries such as Morocco and Jordan have sometimes erroneously been categorised and analysed as hybrid regimes, or even electoral democracies. In order to clarify that question as well as to exemplify strategies of reform by the ruling authoritarian monarchs in the Arab world, it is useful to review at least parts of the Arab monarchy debate that emphasises not some erroneously assumed "democraticness" by confusing degrees of liberality with degrees of democracy, but enquires into the ways in which the breakdown of monarchical authoritarian regimes has so far been successfully avoided.

Numerous politicians and even some scholars have been profoundly misled by Arab authoritarian rulers (and by monarchs in particular) who initiated various political reforms, including (yet) another round of constitutional reforms that had been popular among Arab autocrats in past decades. Such observers took reform and limited and reversible liberalisation *within* the system for what it aimed to avoid, namely democratic change *of* regime. Therefore, one point needs to be made clear from the start:

> Royal houses in the eight Arab monarchies – Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf littoral states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE – all wield near-absolute power. None qualifies as a constitutional kingship in which the enthroned incumbent exercises only ceremonial influence while an elected parliamentary government makes policy. Instead, the region's various kings and emirs not only reign but rule: They name cabinets, dictate major domestic and foreign policies, control the state's coercive apparatus, and allow parliaments (where these exist) and judiciaries only limited authority. (Yom & Gause, 2012)[82]

82 Note that the mere fact of having a constitution that exists on paper or in reality (or both) is not synonymous to a "constitutional monarchy". Whether or not a monarchy is a "constitutional monarchy" depends not on the formal existence of a constitution, but on its content and, equally important, the political reality by which constitutions are put into practice. To speak of a constitutional monarchy in an Arab case is therefore – up to the present and in the absence of substantial revisions of current constitutions – a conceptual mistake that academics and informed policy-makers avoid.

In contrast to an earlier literature that viewed absolutist monarchies as "an anachronism in the world of modern nations" (Hudson, 1977, p. 166; see also Halpern, 1963, p. 42), a recently developed debate claims the opposite: With a view to the outcomes of the Arab uprisings, it focuses on "the empirical fact that, of the autocratic regimes that have been over-thrown, all have been republican regimes" (Lucas, Demmelhuber, & Derichs, 2014, p. 161). By contrast, "an authoritarian monarchy has not broken down in the Middle East since the Iranian revolution of 1979" (Bank, Richter, & Sunik, 2013, p. 6). Starting almost with the uprisings themselves, this observation triggered an immediate interest within the scholarly community (for early contributions, see e.g. Menaldo, 2012; Yom & Gause, 2012), and the question obviously was why monarchical regimes managed to survive, whereas several republican regimes did not.

This literature suggests a number of reasons for the seemingly particularly strong resilience of autocracies in monarchies as opposed to republics, only one of which is consistently and plausibly refuted. That is the culturalist (or, looking closer: orientalist) argument that, in the Middle East, monarchical rule was somehow inherently closer to society, closer to the cultural predispositions of the populations, and therefore it enjoyed greater legitimacy among a tribal population that, due to the values of Islam, engrained hereditary principles into traditionally patriarchal societies, or because of a greater acceptance of royal families among the tribal confederations in their societies than of republican rulers. This argument is convincingly rejected by Yom and Gause (2012, p. 77) with the help of numerous historical cases of MENA monarchies that did *not* survive. Apart from that, there is a more general academic consensus that rejects culturalist arguments for explaining political outcomes in the MENA region (see Section 3.1 above; see also Bromley, 1994; Schlumberger, 2001, 2008b).

Among the various arguments discussed more seriously in this debate, Gause and Yom identified the combination of three factors as being determinants for the survival of all Arab monarchies during the uprisings of 2011: "cross-cutting coalitions, hydrocarbon wealth, and foreign patronage account for the resilience of monarchical dictatorship in the Middle East" (Yom & Gause, 2012, p. 86). By contrast, they discard the institutional explanation that monarchs reside high above the polity, and that they are therefore neither dependent on performance or "output legitimacy" (Scharpf, 1970), nor are their positions open to political contestation.[83] The argument is hence that Arab monarchs can rule autonomously while any blame for policy failure does not reach their thrones, but the governments below them.[84]

Bank, Richter and Sunik (2013, 2015) also see a multitude of factors at work to produce monarchical resilience, but they present a much more complex approach. They first classify Arab monarchies into three different subtypes ("dynastic", "linchpin", and "linchtier") and claim that each type reacted differently to the challenges posed by the events of the Arab Spring. In their argument, there is no single strategy that monarchs embark on, no single factor that was present in monarchies only nor any single trajectory to monarchical survival. Rather, there was a complex mix of factors and seven different trajectories in each, of which

83 To be sure, these points are, of course, true; however, these authors reject them as the variables that would explain monarchical resilience.

84 Yom and Gause's refutation of this rather ubiquitous and intuitively plausible claim (Yom & Gause, 2012, p. 78f.) somewhat misses the point and can therefore not serve as a tenable argument against that explanation, but one argument against it is its latent monocausality.

more than two explanatory factors must be present in order for monarchies to survive. This emphasis on causal complexity, traced through Boolean Algebra (fsQCA), contrasts starkly with an earlier contribution by Lucas (2011) who claimed that "Arab monarchies have not been better at democratization than have republics – no king, emir, or sultan has stood for election – but some have been better at liberalization." The simple fact that – if we follow his claim – monarchs did better in political liberalisation, in his view, accounts for their survival in office during the Arab uprisings, rather than any innate features inherent in monarchism per se (as opposed to republican political rule). The logic of this argument builds on earlier findings by Lust-Okar (2005, 2007) about the ability of autocrats to manipulate, that is, divide, oppositional forces by deciding which oppositional forces are allowed and not allowed to participate in the formal political arena. This, in her argument, has repercussions not only on the relations between incumbents and opponents, but also on the relationship of oppositional forces between each other. As van Hüllen aptly carves out:

> Carefully designing and controlling the legal framework for elections, political parties, and civil society, the incumbent regimes succeeded in co-opting oppositional actors and creating "divided structures of contestation". […] While some regimes went further in allowing the semblance of political competition and created forms of "competitive authoritarianism", none of them submitted power to a truly open competition, and they kept tight limits to the freedoms granted to their citizens. (Van Hüllen, 2015, p. 27)

Derichs and Demmelhuber (2014), in their turn, maintain that in the cases of the Arab monarchies, state legitimacy equals regime legitimacy, and that this was the decisive core variable for explaining monarchical survival during and after 2011. In a new take on the subject, Lucas (2014) also refined his earlier view and argues that the particular way in which decision-making power, economic resources and cultural norms are distributed as "mechanisms of monarchism" would explain the variations in both the protests that monarchies faced as opposed to republics, and also the variations within the group of monarchies.[85] In a later essay, Yom (2016) emphasises and shifts the focus to agent-centred processes of mutual learning, emanation and conscious adaptation rather than structural variables:

> We should study not only what these royal autocracies *are* in terms of structure, but also what they *do,* in terms of agency. We must understand how they made certain choices and implemented new policies in an effort to survive. (Yom, 2016, p. 1)

In that respect, he claims that there is – as a consequence of the 2011 challenges – an entirely new level of inter-monarchical cooperation (dubbed "pan-royalism") on both the formal and informal levels, in institutions as well as in policies (such as, for instance, cross-policing practices and the criminalisation of speech acts by citizens who voice unfavourable views of monarchies other than their own, but are criminalised within their *own* local jurisdiction);

85 Note, however, the deviation in the dependent variable, as compared to the other contributions to the debate discussed here!

or transnational formal-institutional agreements (such as the Joint Security Agreement, which the Arab monarchies concluded in 2012).[86]

In sum, thus, the contributions mentioned here (and a range of others) have proposed a rather large number of possible explanatory factors that might be instrumental in explaining *why* the political regimes of the eight autocratic Arab monarchies survived the uprisings of 2011 up to the present, and why none of them experienced democratisation.[87] Although the scholars cannot agree on what *exactly* had made the Arab monarchies more likely to weather the storms of challenges to their rule, they do concur insofar as they all see some sort of "monarchical exceptionalism" (Barari, 2015) at work that manifests itself in the wake of the Arab uprisings and their aftermath.

There is an emerging debate, however, as other scholars have raised doubts about the sustainability of the argument that it was some feature inherent to Arab monarchies that helped the Moroccan and Jordanian monarchies as well as the sheikhdoms of the Gulf to survive the Arab uprisings. Upon closer inspection, for instance, the Egyptian regime seems to have kept the regime that was established in 1952 after – for a year and a half – the military had adopted a wait-and-see attitude. The military still remains *the* central *locus* of political, military and economic power in the country. Thus, despite the demise of an individual neopatrimonial *leader*, *Egypt* does *not* represent a clear case of systemic *change of regime*. Other presidential regimes such as *Algeria* – or for that matter *Syria* – have managed to survive as well. On the other hand, Bahrain's monarchical regime is very likely to not have survived the Arab uprisings had it not been for the GCC's military intervention for the sake of rescuing the regime in place. In Yom's words: "Bahrain experienced near-revolution. Its opposition trend was massive in size, cross-sectarian (at least at its outset), and existentially threatening to the regime" (Yom, 2017, p. 80).

Overall, thus, the observation of "monarchical exceptionalism" remains valid, but on a rather superficial and descriptive level of analysis only; but the jury is still out on the soundness of the explanatory suggestions as to why their degree of resilience might be higher than that of some of the republics. First, Arab presidents usually *also* ruled for life (for more detail see Owen, 2012), and several incumbent personalist dictators of republics groomed their sons for hereditary rule (Yemen, Syria, Iraq before 2003 and Libya – as well as Egypt before 2011 – are examples). This is why political rule in Arab republics has also been labelled "presidential monarchy" (e.g. Hinnebusch, 1981; 1994, p. 98; 2001, p. 67; and others): Most of those features that are considered today as being typical for monarchical autocracies are present in Arab republics as well.

For the most part, this explicit preparation of sons of Arab presidents to inherit office from their fathers enraged citizens and augmented the number of protesters before and during the uprisings of 2011; there is no case in modern Arab history in which monarchs, once

86 Note that authoritarian learning and adaptation as used here are not synonymous with diffusion processes mentioned earlier: The former are done by intent, whereas the latter may occur without intent due to structural interchanges.

87 Note the unanimous agreement of the literature on Arab monarchies about the fact that no democratisation occurred after 2011. The issue at stake in this literature is *not whether, but why* this is so. That is to say, the phenomenon all of them seek to explain is the resilience of monarchical authoritarianism, that is, the question of why no Arab monarchy underwent systemic political change in the aftermath of 2011.

overthrown, were re-invited to the throne. Thus, dynastic rule does not appear to be more *legitimate* in the eyes of the people than non-hereditary rule – a fact that also contradicts culturalist-essentialist arguments.

Furthermore, rulers' strategies in their responses to the challenges that arose with the uprisings also do not seem to differ much from those employed by Arab republics when they faced their own crises. Rather, factors other than, and beyond, formal regime denomination (monarchical or republican) – such as the availability of rent and other material incentives to distribute among a broad enough coalition of regime supporters; the existence of a loyal police and security apparatus and a loyal military; or the absence of meaningful external pressure for substantive reform – can be assumed to play a much greater role in explaining regime breakdown and survival in times of crises than the formal labels attached to the positions of the rulers. In sum, thus, the types of reactions to the Arab uprisings that regime elites engaged in (see also the preceding sub-sections) are not qualitatively different from monarchies to republics.

7.4 Studying the Tunisian exception

For several decades now, *political reform and liberalisation* have not caused systemic change in a single Arab country, and that includes the one case of democratisation there is: Tunisia. In that case, there is no doubt that systemic transition did, in fact, take place when measured against the yardstick of Fishman's (and others') definition of "political regime" (see footnote 6 above), and against definitions of "transition" and "democratisation" (see Section 2 above). Yet – and this is important – in this single case in which systemic change towards democracy *did* occur, transition took place not *because* of political reform or liberalisation, but because liberalisation had *not* been implemented by the ruling elite for too long.[88] The regime fell because of the failure of incumbent elites to make concessions and engage in reform, and because they failed to add legitimacy (and co-optation) to the pillar of repression (see Gerschewski 2013).

The debate over how democracy could be installed in Tunisia has not found a consensus. However, at least some points can be stated on this question with at least some degree of certainty.

Inquiring into the possible causes of democratisation in Tunisia, it is quite clear that most structural factors on the macro-level of analysis are unlikely to have caused Tunisia's transition: Pre-transition Tunisia was far too similar to those that surround it and which have not democratised. Logically, therefore, those similarities that Tunisia shares with its neighbours cannot causally account for vastly differing outcomes.[89] For instance, cultural differences between Tunisia and, say, Algeria or Libya, or variations in the levels of socio-

88 Ben Ali's Tunisia had been notorious, even in intra-regional comparison, for its high levels of repression and its "police state".

89 Neighbouring Algeria is a case of authoritarian resilience; neighbouring Libya one of regime breakdown with subsequent state breakdown and an ensuing internationalised multi-year civil war; Egypt and Morocco, in their turn, are instances of authoritarian survival of a monarchy and a republic. In short, the outcomes of political change could hardly be more different from the Tunisian ones.

economic modernisation between, say, Tunisia and Morocco are not so large that they could explain a transition in the one case as opposed to authoritarian survival in the other. Modernisation theory and structural functionalism as well as culturalist approaches are, thus, of little relevance to an explanation for democratisation in Tunisia. A similar point can be made for a meso-level of analysis that would look at class structures, the constellation of social classes and the inequitable distribution of so-called power resources (financial assets, education, reputation, status, access to elites, and the like) as being causal for systemic political change. Again, there are far too many similarities between Tunisia and its neighbours and other comparable cases within the MENA region to make it a likely assumption that these factors have played any decisive role in the country's transition to democracy. This leaves us with the international environment on the one hand, and actor-centred variables on the other as the remaining clusters of potentially causal variables for an explanation.

The international context for Tunisia turns out, upon closer inspection, to also not have been structurally different from the ones in neighbouring countries. If anything, we should expect liberal democracies to have worked in favour of democratisation, as this cannot rationally be expected to be part of the foreign policies of large autocracies such as Russia and China. Looking at the traditional democracies, however, presents a sobering picture.

Although the United States does have a certain degree of geopolitical interest in North Africa, it is by no means as politically, economically or militarily present as it is in the Levant (Jordan in particular), Egypt and the Gulf peninsula. The EU, for its part, and as in other Arab countries, has been engaged since before 2011 in a number of measures under the heading of "democracy assistance". But given the more than obvious lack of political will of local leaders to seriously adopt such policies, EU reactions did not entail the exertion of any kind of pressure that would have been exerted on recipient countries, including Tunisia.[90] At no point was the EU ready to exert any significant pressure on Tunisia's regime elites in order to achieve even a semblance of adherence to international human rights obligations, let alone civil liberties or political rights to speak of. A third important international actor in North Africa is France in its role as a former colonial power that traditionally has had considerable influence on its former territories, not only linguistically. And indeed, there had been strong linkages between French and Tunisian elite members right up to the ouster of the *ancien régime* under the presidency of Ben Ali. But France had little inclination to exert any pressure on Ben Ali's regime – quite the contrary: In January 2011, then-French Minister of Culture, Frédéric Mitterrand, stated that "strictly speaking,

90 For instance, in no single case has the European Commission invoked the infamous article (2) of the Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements, which would, theoretically, have allowed the EU to effectively withhold and withdraw funds from recipient countries, or even to revoke association agreements, in the case of human rights violations and violations of the rule of law. That article reads: "Relations between the Parties, as well as all the provisions of the Agreement itself, shall be based on respect for human rights and democratic principles which guide their domestic and international policies and constitute an essential element of the Agreement" (European Communities, 1998). Tunisia, pre-2011, as is broadly known, was notorious for such violations and for its lack of basic civil liberties and political rights (in 2010, Freedom House rated the country's political rights situation with a score of 7 – the most unfree possible, on *a par* with only few states worldwide such as North Korea and Saudi Arabia).

Tunisia is not a dictatorship". Only two days before the former Tunisian dictator fled the country to Saudi Arabia, then-French Foreign Minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, offered to Tunisia the help of France's "globally respected know-how of our security services" in the face of the "complex situation" in the country, because these services, in her words, were trained "to manage security situations of this type" (all quotes from Le Monde, 2011).[91] In sum, thus, Tunisia transitioned to democracy despite, not because of, international factors.

By contrast, the two most plausible causes for the fact that democracy could gain hold after the fall of the prior regime are both actor-related. First, the military leadership – and, more particularly, then-Army Chief of Staff, General Rachid Ammar – decided to not follow the orders of the seemingly omnipotent president at the crucial moment when mass mobilisation could only have been suppressed by military force (the police had already proven unable to contain the protests). This rejection to issue orders to shoot at protesters ultimately enabled the protests to gain the scale that swept the president out of office and country. Thus, there is not exactly the ideal-typically envisaged "split" in the old regime that Przeworski (1991, chap. 2) imagines in his game-theoretical decision-tree, nor have real events exactly followed the sequencing that he modelled. But there is indeed a rift between incumbent elites that initiates the fall of the regime and, as such, seems typical for what actor-centred approaches would predict for situations in which the old regime confronts a mobilised opposition.

Second, democracy, as we have seen in neighbouring Libya, needs not necessarily be the outcome when a political regime breaks down. Tunisia's democratisation arguably has to do with specific constellations and actions of oppositional actors as well as with the unity that characterised the opposition at the moment when systemic change was on the horizon – a feature that in itself needs to be explained and likely is due to the fact that, de facto, the entire Tunisian political opposition in its various programmatic orientations was exiled in Europe during the reign of Ben Ali. This had created truly exceptional circumstances, as the leader of the strong Islamist Nahda party – having resided in London for several decades prior to the regime breakdown – had adopted democracy-compatible norms and attitudes, as had other exiled oppositional activists. A series of secret meetings in Paris – long before Ben Ali had to flee from the Tunisian presidency – gave the various oppositional forces the chance to engage with one another in a protected, free and open space, united in their opposition to dictatorship at home. That way, they could discuss and establish agreement (long before the regime actually broke down) on a future democratic system once the old regime was gone, a system in which none of the hitherto oppressed forces would be threatened. Precisely this need for a unified opposition has also been elaborated on by authors with leanings towards actor-centred approaches of explaining democratisation (Merkel & Lauth, 1998). To sum up, these are, even by global standards, truly exceptional circumstances that not only united the exiled Tunisian opposition in their stand against Ben Ali's dictatorship, but also enabled them to engage in open and constructive dialogue about the country's future. This presented a chance that is extremely rare in that form prior to

91 It is not entirely surprising, therefore, that later, it turned out that Ms. Alliot-Marie had spent private vacations with her partner upon invitation of Tunisia's then ruling Ben Ali–Trabelsi clan and its clients (see Le Monde, 2011).

political transitions because the old regime – as has been outlined above – tries everything it can to polarise and divide oppositional forces and restrict any public space whatsoever, but this is precisely what allows actors to reach a democratic compromise, without fear and without time pressure.[92]

It is in that sense, then, that – due to a number of very fortunate events and decisions taken in a distinct manner and sequencing – democratisation could occur in Tunisia but not in other places, which is explainable mainly through actor-centred theoretical approaches towards the study of transitions. These can explain why in the single case of Tunisia, strategies of authoritarian regime maintenance could not succeed, whereas they did in most other MENA countries.

* * *

The complex mix of identity politics; manipulation of the opposition; co-optation schemes for at least strategically vital segments of the population; the distribution of material benefits as well as increased levels of repression; along with processes of authoritarian learning as regards tactics of repression; of international legitimation efforts; and of the rhetorical framing of modernisation and reform processes, including political reform – all this requires complex and in-depth, case-by-case analyses to make sound statements about the likelihood of systemic change. At the same time, structural variables that are at play add to this complexity.

Based on what has been reviewed empirically in the above paragraphs, a few such statements seem in order at this point on the two issues of, first, whether or not transitions have occurred and, second, whether political change, as seen in the post-2011 period, has made such systemic transitions more likely than before.

92 A second important decision was to not put undue time pressure on the process of constitution writing. The election of a constitutional assembly and the lengthy and in part fierce discussions within that assembly about every single draft paragraph was carried out until a compromise was reached about that particular article. While this took much more time than anticipated, the time seems to have been well invested, as the constitutional assembly ultimately endorsed the new, truly democratic constitution with an overwhelming majority across the spectrum of political parties.

8 Conclusions

Has there been systemic political change in the Arab world since 2011?

Systemic change in the form of democratisation has, with the notable exception of Tunisia, not occurred in any Arab country as of the time of writing, neither as a consequence of mass protests from below, nor as a consequence of reform from above. In fact, post-2011 Tunisia has a political order that allows for the competitive selection of leaders to "all positions of effective governing power" (Diamond, Linz, & Lipset, 1988),[93] as the above-given definition of democracy stipulates. It also is a case in which Dahl's "eight institutional guarantees" (see Box 1) can at least roughly be considered to exist, however deficient and threatened by old regime forces and other anti-democrats Tunisia's democracy might be. All other regimes in place in the Arab world almost ideal-typically match Linz's standard definition of authoritarian regimes (see Box 1). No other Middle Eastern political regime (except Israel) qualifies as "democratic" today. Their political systems fall short of fulfilling the basic definitional criteria of democracy, as there is not even a theoretical chance that power-holders could be removed from office in a legal, participatory political process that is constitutionally provided for. Whether monarchies, where the kings are a priori excluded from political competition, "monarchical presidents" (first: Hinnebusch, 1981) or, alternatively, "presidents for life" (Owen, 2012): None of the countries from Algeria to Yemen know the peaceful transfer of the top political power-holders through regular and legal means such as elections.

Likewise, it would be hardly reflective, and in fact even contradictory, of empirical realities to refer to Arab political regimes (except maybe Tunisia) as "hybrid regimes", according to the above definitions (Section 2). Not only would that insinuate a level of contestation over top political positions of power in which an opposition stands a real chance of reaching the highest positions of power within the state – a situation that does not exist anywhere in the Arab region except in post-2011 Tunisia (see again the definition by Diamond, Linz and Lipset above); it also ignores the fact that these regimes empirically meet all definitional elements of "authoritarianism". This is because there is no possibility of positions of top political power being transferred to different actors through participatory, regular and peaceful means, whereas in hybrid systems, that possibility does exist in reality (and actually sometimes *becomes* reality[94]). Regardless of the respective degree of liberality or illiberalism that prevails in any of the MENA countries at any point in time, and which can oscillate over time to quite some degree: What matters for the correct answer to the taxonomic question is the qualitative barrier that exists due to the impossibility of a (legal) contestation of the "centre of political power" (Fishman, 1990), as well as the impossibility of changes to how access to those top power centres is organised through legal political procedures.

93 Note that this also excludes the possibility of "ruling monarchs" (Yom, 2016, 2017); see also Schmitter and Karl (1991) and, for that matter, *any* definition of democracy used in political science. Schmitter and Karl emphasise this point of unelected decision-making from "above" the elected government as being incompatible in principle with democracy.

94 Among the better-known examples are the ruling *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* party's electoral loss in Mexico after almost 80 years in power; the electoral defeat of the Indian National Congress in 1977 after having ruled since independence, or, more recently, Ukraine in 2004.

Finally and very obviously, transition has not happened in the sense of Holtmann's definition: All Arab regimes (except Tunisia) where statehood has not collapsed (as in Libya, Yemen, Somalia or de facto in Iraq) are very far indeed from the kind of "complete exchange […] of fundamental structures and norms, of legal rules and bodies of personnel (functional elites), of career paths and patterns of action in the state, the economy, and in large parts of society" (definition by Holtmann, 2010; see Section 2). They are nowhere near that "process of transitioning from some other political system type […] to one that is democratic in nature" (the definition of "democratisation" by Frantz, 2018, p. 134).[95] In no case, apart from Tunisia, has "the formal and informal organization of the center of political power" (Fishman, 1990, p. 428) been changed in a way that this would amount to a change in the *type* of political regime to *democracy*.

And yet, the Tunisian exception forcefully demonstrates that systemic transition is possible in principle. The Tunisian case therefore adds further empirical disconfirmation of culturalist and essentialist theories of democratisation that claim an impossibility *in principle* of democratisation in certain world regions, based on the prevailing "civilisation" or "religion". Although these approaches have already largely been discarded here and have been, in the academic world, largely discredited for many years, some still find them tempting to invoke, despite massive evidence to the contrary.

Yet, successful transitions to democracy, such as in Tunisia, have in no case been the consequence of oppositional pressure from below, nor of political reform from above. The latter, as has been outlined above, and however liberalising they might look, have in no case resulted in political transitions.[96] The opposite is true: Political reform from above in autocracies is a regime-enhancing strategy that leads to enhanced survival prospects for autocrats, not to its opposite (democratic transition). The reason why reform is unlikely to trigger systemic political change is that leaders and core elites would have to initiate steps that contradict their primary and most important interests. A core assumption of the social sciences is that rational actors do not usually choose strategies that contradict their most important preference. It is therefore not rational to assume that political reform could lead to democratisation – except in the very unlikely event that decision-makers would make grossly wrong choices. It is equally irrational to assume that autocrats would somehow engage in constant reforms and maybe pick the wrong issue area so that they lose control involuntarily. Decades of political reform in well over a dozen countries in the MENA region lend ample confirmation to this statement and have not provided a single piece of counter-evidence.[97]

In highly personalised political regimes, such as those that characterise the MENA region, systemic political change is thus most likely to come about through either external military

95 Note that this is not a matter of interpretation, but, if anything, a matter of analytical rigor in the usage of core concepts in the study of political regimes and their transformations. Note also that there is unanimous consensus among scholars whose main research field is the study of political regimes, their types, and their changes, and who wield expertise on the MENA region about the content of the above paragraphs.

96 The underlying assumption that small reform steps would somehow "add up" and at one point result in democracy itself is fundamentally flawed in that it mistakes the very nature of political reform in dictatorial contexts as progressive act of change rather than conservative strategy of power maintenance.

97 The reasons why authoritarian leaders are structurally not more, but less likely to fall prey to wrong choices than their counterparts in democracies have been elaborated on above (see Section 7.2.5).

intervention, economic collapse – as has been demonstrated for sub-Saharan African cases in particular (see Bratton & van de Walle, 1997) – or a series of coincidences that can hardly be planned or foretold, such as in the Tunisian transition in the last decade.

How do we know when change is systemic?

But if democratisation has not occurred in the Arab world apart from Tunisia, a related question appears on the horizon: How do we *know* it when change is systemic? This question, too, can be answered without much ado: The answer relates to the set of key concepts that have been defined in Section 2: According to all scholarly definitions, systemic "transition from authoritarian rule" (O'Donnell, Schmitter, & Whitehead, 1986) has happened if and when the outcome is a non-authoritarian regime, that is: either democracy or totalitarianism. Put simply, systemic political change has, by definition, happened when, and *only* when, a political regime has broken down and exited *and* a new one has successfully been institutionalised when, and *only* when, this new regime is democratic or totalitarian. If we exclude totalitarian transitions and restrict the discussion to the question of democratic transitions only, democracy needs to be defined, as has been done in Section 2, with the help of Dahl's or Diamond, Linz and Lipset's definitions, which have, in their various formulations, become the only currency in empirical political science research.[98] Such a process has not happened in the Arab world over the past four decades – except, as mentioned, in Tunisia. The first two questions have thus been answered unambiguously.

Has democratisation become more likely because of political reforms that countries implemented after 2011?

A question much more difficult to come to a clear answer to is the third: Have political reforms, as undertaken after the 2011 mass uprisings in the Arab world, made *systemic change more likely* to occur in the future? Predictions, the proverb goes, are very difficult, especially if they concern the future. However, not everything is in the eye of the beholder: Those factors that are thought to make such change *of* regime – not *in* regime – more likely are summarised and merged from Sections 4 and 6. Steps towards a future operationalisation of such factors, as gained from the literature of the past decades, are summarised in the Annex. The concrete operationalisation of a number of such indicators, however, will partially depend on the specific context of empirical investigations and the case(s) under examination.

The single most important caveat that remains, however, must be taken seriously. This concerns the question Bruce Gilley asked in 2005 in an article in which he predicted that China would soon transition to electoral democracy: "Should we try to predict transitions to democracy?" He answered this question unambiguously: "[T]he gravest danger is no prediction at all" (Gilley, 2005, p. 114). By contrast, Goodwin convincingly explains why "it is simply impossible for social scientists or others to precisely predict where or when

98 Admittedly, the matter is somewhat different in political philosophy, where more substantial definitions continue to be debated, as have been suggested by, for instance, Jürgen Habermas and others.

revolutions or mass uprisings will occur" (Goodwin, 2011, p. 453).[99] In line with what actor-centred approaches on transition (see Section 3.3 above) tell us, "the highly contingent nature of human behavior makes it impossible to predict accurately the actual or even likely trajectory of societies" (Goodwin, 2011, p. 455). The probability of political transitions is thus not measurable ex ante because transitions are non-linear processes that, moreover, once they unfold, do not follow clearly detectable patterns. Although factors that trigger upheaval, unrest and revolutions (not part of this paper!) can be identified – and academic writers had repeatedly warned of major unrest in the Arab world for many years prior to the outbreak of the mass protests in 2011 (see, among others, Schlumberger, 2010) – the point in time *when* such upheavals occur cannot be foretold.

What can safely be stated, however, is that *if* recent political reforms in the Arab world were to lead to systemic change, that would be the opposite of the *intent*.

In that uncertainty, the first thing policy-makers can and must do is to refrain from the cardinal error of believing that political transitions were linear processes in which little steps towards ever-greater freedoms and liberties would somehow magically add up to ultimately produce systemic change (democracy) without major conflict or without an exit of the *ancien régime*. This has not been the case in any political transition anywhere ever since they began being scientifically studied and recorded. The first necessary step in a transition is the qualitative leap that they all contain by definition, and this is the removal from power of an old ruling elite. The second necessary step, for democratisation more specifically, is that the rules of the political game be written anew in such a way that those new rules guarantee in the future an inclusive, competitive and participatory political process in such a way that they qualify as transitions to democracy, and thus match with definitions of that regime type. It is no small challenge to successfully install such a political regime, and even Tunisia remains far from consolidated; in many cases this process is not consolidated but derailed, and outcomes other than democracy are a likely result (one such instance is well known to Germans from the failure of their own first democracy). In the Arab world, however, step one (exit of the *ancien régime*) remains out of sight at the time of writing in all countries except Tunisia and in those cases in which stateness itself has been lost (Yemen, Libya, Iraq post-2003), meaning that speculations about step two are out of place at this point in time.

Still, the question remains about how likely future systemic transitions might be. To answer this question of whether or not the probability of systemic change has increased post-2011, it is analytically not relevant as to which issue areas or fields of action such reforms are

99 This is due to the peculiar mix of, first, preference falsification by actors under the constrained conditions of authoritarianism, and, second, the dependence of actual action on "amorphous rumors, heightened emotions, and conflicting duties" (Kurzman, 2004, p. 170). Whether or not an individual chooses to participate in protest will be influenced by these factors; this is apart from general risk aversion and her estimates of how many others might join a protest, and how the regime reacts. Likewise, whether or not officers order police forces to shut down a demonstration and whether or not an army battalion will remain loyal or defect are also decisions similarly shaped by these "amorphous rumors, heightened emotions, and conflicting duties". Note, thus, that this observation holds for both the actions of anti-regime opponents as well as those of pro-regime forces, such as the armed forces.

undertaken (such as women's rights; security sector; decentralisation; anti-corruption; civil society legislation; business, financial or investment frameworks; electoral and political party laws; human rights; ombudspersons; other formal institutions, etc.), or whether reform "goes macro" and aims at changes to the constitution as such. This is so because reforms are part of systems maintenance strategies and not systems abolishment strategies.

Of course, all of this does not mean that reforms are irrelevant. First, they are very relevant for enhancing the prospects of prolonging the tenure of autocrats, as has been established by Frantz with the help of new datasets[100] on autocratic regimes: "Many reforms often considered to be signs of political liberalization are actually associated with greater authoritarian regime survival" (Frantz, 2018, p. 137). Second, reforms that do not bring about transition do not necessarily bring *no* change. But the change they bring may be ambiguous at best: First, we must assume such change to enhance authoritarian rule; second, change might still bring benefits to those who oppose the regime. It might be easier for them to live with the regime in liberalised rather than in non-liberalised conditions, even at the price of moving transition further away.

But reform that falls short of power-sharing arrangements with formerly excluded collective actors and interests does not change the regime as such. For this reason, reform is likely the most treacherous type of regime strategy because it is so often mistaken for what it is not: As enhancing prospects for systemic change towards democracy, whereas what it does is almost always the opposite.

There is only one pathway in which political reforms, as discussed here and in Section 5.2.5, could theoretically contribute to democratic transitions, and that is if they went "astray", meaning: if they missed their goals and instead contained measures that would *unintendedly* curtail the powers of incumbent authoritarian elites in an unforeseen manner. Chances that this will be the case, however, are extremely slim, and this is so for at least four reasons, which have all been discussed above.

First, authoritarian rulers have unrestricted access to the best available know-how, professional counselling and advice worldwide; we must therefore assume they have a very good grasp of any potential consequences of political decisions they take. Second, stakes for incumbents are extremely high, which means rash decisions with potentially large unintended impacts on power maintenance are unlikely. Third, processes of authoritarian learning seem to have accelerated over the past two decades, and there is by now an acute awareness of the successes and failures of other authoritarian regimes among Arab autocrats. Fourth, given that personalist dictatorships, as they prevail in the MENA region, are the least likely to cede or share power voluntarily by negotiating their own exist, we should expect them to cling to power more desperately than Latin America's military juntas or the communist leadership of the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

Although political science, after roughly six decades of research into this topic, now knows of a number of variables that are hypothesised as playing a role in making democratisation more likely, none of those variables are related to the kinds of reform Arab leaderships have undertaken in reaction to the mass protests. By contrast, they squarely fall under the

100 There was a proliferation of various datasets on authoritarian regimes created in the second half of the last decade. For a brief overview of these, see Schlumberger and Schedler (2020).

categories of so-called authoritarian upgrading, that is, intentional strategies for the maintenance of authoritarian rule initiated by incumbent dictators. The short answer to the final question guiding this paper ("Did reforms increase the likelihood of systemic change?") is therefore an equally clear "no", at least in the short to medium term.

Given that such political reforms are aimed at providing a shield against systemic transition, it can be concluded that they make political transitions *less* likely, at least in the short to medium term, as explained above.

However, there is a possible indirect effect of political reform as conducted in the MENA region in past decades that results from a loss of time due to this type of "reformism". This "trap of liberalized autocracy" (Brumberg, 2002) may lead to undesired long-term outcomes, as valuable time is lost by such engagement in ad hoc and piecemeal political reforms instead of establishing a plan to systematically tackle the massive and long-standing developmental problems in the region that were at the heart of the last wave of revolts, and which are undertaken (the controlled reforms for authoritarian survival) in order to enhance the longevity of current dictatorships. It remains to be seen, but it is very possible that this reluctance on the part of authoritarian rulers and their elites to address the structural deficits of political and economic development may backfire for incumbents as well as the international community that supports them, in the sense that new protests will not need another half century to erupt again. If what Ottaway and Dunne (2007, p. 4) claimed a decade ago is true, namely that "limited reforms introduced from the top often *increase* rather than decrease bottom-up *demand for more radical change*" [emphasis added], then the Arab world might well be poised for even stormier weather than that seen in the last decade, as Jordan's former foreign minister and deputy prime minister prominently predicts today (see Muasher, 2018).

But in contrast to what Muasher thinks, such transformational change, if it happens, is extremely unlikely to be initiated from the top – as various sections in this paper have shown – given the lack of political will by both incumbent regimes as well as the international environment. Rather, it will likely come through (potentially violent and at any rate highly conflictual) ruptures from below, and most likely from a disenfranchised younger generation that no longer buys the decades-old promises of reform, which, to be sure, they have been hearing all their lives – not only since 2011. "Festering economic frustration does not always spawn spontaneous mobilization, but it is reasonable to assume that it makes such mobilization more likely," writes Yom (2017, p. 144). With formal participatory institutions that are void of substance, reforms that deliberately aim at power maintenance "make it more likely that such change will be revolutionary and *probably not democratic*" (Yom, 2017, p. 141; emphasis added).[101]

Judging from today's perspective, it seems therefore unlikely that –, in the absence of massive international pro-democratic pressure and consistently enacted economic leverage for the sake of substantial pro-democratic political concessions – systemic political change will lead to

101 The implicit background of this assessment is that actor-centred transitology (see Section 3.3) predicts a low likelihood that change can result in consolidated democratic orders if and when such change comes about as a result of revolutionary conflictual processes rather than through negotiations.

democratic outcomes if and when it occurs.[102] The breakdown of political regimes with subsequent state failure and/or state collapse, or a re-configuration of authoritarian regimes – similar to or different from the ones that rule today – seem much more likely prospects for the Arab countries once their political regimes come to an end. Libya and Yemen are thus more likely the trendsetters rather than Tunisia, if no fundamental changes occur to the international community's foreign policies towards that region, and if the youth in Arab countries continue to be frustrated by their rulers and foreign allies economically, politically and socially.

Given these prospects, this concept paper concludes with a note on the role of concepts for real life: We might call things by the wrong name – so what? Well, there is a greater danger than "just" getting the analytics wrong: By referring to authoritarian regimes such as those of Morocco, Jordan and others as "democratic" or "hybrid" ones, we commit more than just a taxonomic error (which might be relevant only to inhabitants of an academic ivory tower). What is much worse: We legitimise, through the sloppy usage of language, the authoritarian type of rule by belittling and, in fact, negating the political and economic deprivations that this regime type brings for those subjects suffering from it. When we are choosing false language, we are choosing to side with those who abuse their incontestable positions of power and deny their subjects the right to be citizens. In other words, we betray the norms we claim to be universal. It matters ethically, therefore, how we categorise political regimes and by what names we call them. It also impacts directly on our own reputation among the vast majority of the populations who live under authoritarianism, and it also impacts upon the reputation of democracy beyond our own countries. This, in turn, may very likely have serious repercussions on how democracy is viewed by those who take over power once they have chased away the dictators who rule them today.

102 Note that this also impacts on the nature and quality of what donors do under the label of "democracy promotion" and which, to date, bears very little resemblance indeed to the kinds of pressures for democracy as outlined here.

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Annex

A1 General indicators that the transitology literature assumes to render future systemic (political) change more likely

As it is necessary – in order to scientifically address the likelihood of democratic transitions – to look at those factors that are said to cause such transitions (Sections 3 and 4), the following provides an overview of such hypothesised factors and reviews which kinds of indicators have been suggested as proxies by which to measure them. In some instances, the validity of suggested proxies is today highly questionable. In other instances, own possible indicators are suggested to either substitute for ones found in the literature, or are suggested without relation to existing research where such indicators have not been suggested or are clearly outdated (such as e.g. landline telephone access per 1,000 inhabitants).

Table A1: Indicators assumed to increase the likelihood of democratisation

Theory	Hypothesised causal variable(s)	Possible indicators/ indicators used in literature	Ideas towards a more specific operationalisation
Modernisation theory	Industrialisation	Share of agriculture vs. industry vs. services in GDP	Shares of agriculture, industry and services in GDP
	Urbanisation	Urbanisation rate	Urbanisation rate
	Education	Share of population with elementary/secondary/ tertiary education	Literacy rates and other educational indicators
	Access to information and communications technologies		TV sets/internet users per 1,000 inhabitants, but in combination with "access to alternative sources of information" (Dahl, 1971, p. 3), i.e.: media independent of and uncensored by regime elites
	Existence of a broad middle class	Income quantiles Share of professionals and SME Entrepreneurs	Inclusive vs. exclusive regime discourses
	Moderate norms and values prevail within society	Attitudes towards democracy, basic freedoms, rule of law, independence of judiciary, and the like	Tolerance towards societal pluralism (gay rights, ethnic and religious plurality, alternative views on political questions…)
	Political legitimacy		Sources of legitimacy; legitimation patterns
	(Lipset, 1959, 1994)		
Systems theory	Functional differentiation (Parsons, 1964)	Institutional complexity of overall pol. system	Degree of political independence of judiciary;
	Degree of autonomy of partial systems (Luhmann, 1986)	Degree of systemic adaptability	political determinants and degree of autonomy of economic policy-making
		Political independence of economic policy-making	Openness of the public sphere (associations, assembly, public discourse beyond regime control, etc.)
		Independence of societal sphere	Political independence of autonomous civil society organisations

Table A1 (cont.):	**Indicators assumed to increase the likelihood of democratisation**		
Culturalist theories	Civilisations and religion (Huntington, 1984, 1993) Presence and nature of social capital (Merkel & Puhle, 1999; Putnam, 1993, 2000)	Majority religion of population Degree of religiousness of population Religion's influence on politics Strength of voluntary non-commercial associations (VNCA) Share of population active in VNCAs	Majority religion of population Degree of religiousness of population Religion's influence on politics Degree of independence of VNCA in terms of personnel, statutes, finance and fields of activity Share of population active in VNCA Geographic distribution of VNCA inside country
Structuralism	Class constellations (Moore, 1966; Rueschemeyer et al., 1992) Distribution of power resources in society (Vanhanen, 1990, 1997)	Relative strength of bourgeoisie vs. peasants vs. workers (vs. nobility and crown) Educational chances and educational success of overall society Socio-economic (in-) equality income/assets	Relative strength of bourgeoisie vs. workers vs. other wage-earners Levels of asset and income inequality Share of real estate owners Wealth distribution in society Level to which socio-economic background influences educational success Prevalence of informal factors that impact on success in professional life and career
Actor-centred approaches	Split in authoritarian ruling bloc Presence of strategic pol. liberalisation Split in opposition (Colomer 1995, 2000; O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Przeworski, 1986, 1991) Demands for democracy and democratic attitudes in opposition Societal mobilisation against regime Readiness and likelihood of softliners to turn into democratisers (Colomer 1995; 2000; Przeworski, 1986, 1991; Stepan, 1997)	Ancient regime elite polarisation Structure of opposition Consistence of liberalisation measures over time Results of regular surveying (Pew, World Values Survey, etc.) of democratic approval; Organised and active democratic opposition Elite attitudes (through interviews and surveys, but usually difficult to impossible to obtain)	Indicators for ancient regime elite polarisation History of previous political (de-) liberalisation under same elites Structure of opposition Indirect questioning in surveys (e.g. tolerance, pluralism, various freedoms) rather than for approval of formal institutions (parliament, parties, etc.) or of "democracy" per se! Structure and degree of mobilisation of society and opposition Constellation between softliners and moderate opposition; Strength of hardliners vis-à-vis softliners

Table A1 (cont.):	**Indicators assumed to increase the likelihood of democratisation**		
Approaches centered on international factors	"Democraticness" of intl. environment (Gleditsch & Ward, 2006; Whitehead, 1986; 2001) Democracy promotion (DP) efforts by outside powers (Carothers, 1999; Burnell, 2007; Burnell & Schlumberger, 2010; Van Hüllen, 2015; Youngs, 2001, 2009, 2010)	Regime type in neighbouring / regional countries Influence and interrelations between regimes and societies of the region International actors engaged in DP • level of engagement • sectors of engagement • DP actor's reputation in local society	Regime type in neighbourhood/region Types and density of inter-relations between case and surrounding countries Consistency of overall DP strategies Consistency of DP policies implemented Absence of conflicting donor policy goals and interests or political will by donor govt. to subject other policy goals to DP Political will of recipient government: • to accept or invite DP measures • to pro-actively seek improvement in political development • to sustain results after end of engagement through own initiative and resources
	Leverage by and Linkages to Democratic Powers vs. by/to Autocratic Powers Abroad (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011; Levitsky & Way, 2005; 2010)	Influence and interrelations between regimes and societies of the region as well as globally	Structure and share of commodity/labour/ services imports/exports FDI levels Endowment with exportable resources and degree of world market dependence on these
	Influence of International Power Constellations on Country/Region (Acharya, 2014; Drezner, 2007; Ikenberry, 2008)	Power constellations (regionally/globally) Role of the case in global economy Geostrategic role of the case	Qualitative assessment; expert literature Military strength Embeddedness in military alliances Share in global GDP Structure and sectors of exports and global embeddedness of national economy Degree of dependence of world markets
Source: Author			

A2 Structural factors enhancing authoritarian regime resilience and strategies of authoritarian regime maintenance by incumbent regime elites

The full picture of assessing any likelihood of future systemic regime transitions cannot be gained by looking at the presence or absence of push-factors for democracy only. In order to get the complete picture, these must be seen in combination with the presence or absence of strategies adopted by authoritarian regime elites to maintain power and avoid political transition, as well as in combination with a range of structural factors that enhance the prospects of authoritarian survival over time. Thus, the pull-factors that work towards regime maintenance must also be considered. The non-exhaustive checklist provided below derives from Sections 5 and 6 of this paper and summarises such strategies of authoritarian regime maintenance plus a range of structural factors. While, by definition, it cannot be exhaustive because of the existence of authoritarian learning, exchange and innovation, it does provide an overview of those strategies that are most frequently applied in autocracies today and which have been discussed or touched upon in the (still young) literature.

Table A2: Checklist: Factors and strategies enhancing authoritarian regime survival

Bundle of variables	Hypothesised (causal) variables	Possible indicators/ indicators used in literature	Towards more specific operationalisation
International factors	Autocracy promotion/ democracy prevention (Ambrosio, 2009; Brownlee, 2012; Jackson, 2010; Soest, 2015)	(Geo-)strategic relevance for donors and great powers	Duration and amount of de facto politically unconditioned aid to closed authoritarian regimes (e.g. Freedom House ratings of 5 and below) and vice versa, i.e.: aid received (duration and amount) by closed autocracies Amount and origins of military aid received and arms purchases
	Autocratic linkage (Tansey et al., 2017)	International treaties between autocracies	
		Regular or irregular cooperation in security affairs	Joint manoeuvres Meeting of chiefs of staff Exchange of info by heads of police and other security agencies (e.g. data on opponents, activists or ordinary citizens) Cross-policing and -sanctioning
	Authoritarian learning (Bank & Richter 2016; Heydemann & Leenders, 2011)		
Economic factors	Position in global economy and (inter-) dependence with global economy	Structure of domestic economy, incl. dependence on specific imports/exports Nature of ties to global markets and relevance for these	Breakdown of most important trading partners Economic cooperation agreements and their practice
	Endowment with scarce resources and rentierism (Luciani, 1987; Pawelka, 1993; Ross, 2001 Schlumberger, 2006b)	Allocative power through rent and its equivalents Share of exportable resources and its equivalents in total exports: in GDP and in state revenues	Rent income per capita that is free for domestic allocation Patterns of rent generation and distribution to elites and broader population

Table A2 (cont.): Checklist: Factors and strategies enhancing authoritarian regime survival			
Regime features	Subtype of autocracy (Frantz, 2018; Geddes, Wright & Frantz, 2014a)	Personalist regimes Concentration of power in top leader (and his family) with de facto executive powers	Existence of a political strongman; "Caudillismo"; neopatrimonialism; "YIPPI index" (years in power per incumbent)
		Economic dependence of large private business on leader's consent	Sum of powers accumulated in top leader's (family's) hands
			Degree of personalisation of relations between political leader/top elite and top business magnates
	Imitative institutions (Albrecht & Schlumberger, 2004; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007; Frantz, 2018)	Existence of primary nominally democratic institutions (e.g. parliament; multi-party electoral system) in authoritarian regime context	
		"Secondary imitative institutions" (Ombudsperson, youth parliament, roundtables, human rights and other GONGO associations, etc.)	
State–society relations	Patterns of authority (Eckstein, 1971; 1974; Eckstein & Gurr, 1975)	Existence of similar or dissimilar authority patterns that govern societal organisation and the regime's rules of functioning	Hierarchical vs. non-hierarchical, exclusionary vs. inclusionary, patriarchal vs. participatory rules of social interaction
			Rules of promotion
Autocrats' strategies	Repression	Index ratings in Freedom House, Polity, Bertelsmann Transformation Index	Country reports by said organisations plus ratings/rankings
		Reports by human rights organisations	Human rights organisations' reports
			Expert literature
			(*No index exists nor will any, for structural reasons of access to information, exist any time soon, thus qualitative assessment is required*)
	Co-optation, patronage and alimentation of society	Level of subsidies on gas, basic foodstuffs, consumables	Percentage of subsidies on consumer goods, gas and basic foodstuffs
		Share of total subsidies in budget Public sector share in workforce	Structure, quality and quantity of public health care, social and educational systems
			Share of total subsidies in budget
		Structure of opposition	
			Public-sector share in workforce
		Amalgamation between state and business elites	Size and performance of bureaucracy
			Survey data on informality (corruption; complications in and fairness of routine procedures; transparency; accountability; etc.) in business, administration, society
			Public procurement practices

Table A2 (cont.): Checklist: Factors and strategies enhancing authoritarian regime survival			
			Privatisation procedures and local beneficiaries Level and agents of direct tax evasion Type of state-business relations (separation vs. collusion/type of collusion) Regime links to civil societal organisations; professional organisations and civic associations through kin, friendship or other personal relations Promotion procedures in public service and security organs, incl. armed forces and police
Autocrats' strategies (continued)	Management of opposition	Structure of opposition Political party regulations Development of political parties and party system Role of political parties and other groups in decision-making	Structure of opposition (along Lust-Okar, 2005) Political party laws Political party and party system development since regime exists (or past three decades)
		Degree of societal heterogeneity; Role of identity-based groups and associations in society and politics Organisation of opposition along ethnicity, religion or tribe	Social cleavages along ascriptive status identity Degree of overlap between political identities and ascriptive status identities
	Identity politics	Identity-based regime discourse and mobilisation	Intentional political polarisation on the basis of status identity through the regime through discourse Discriminatory legal regulations against groups based on status identity Discriminatory regime practices against specific groups based on status identity
	Political reform and liberalisation	Existence of political reform What is their nature: Have they brought about significant changes to the existing power constellations?	Presence of a reformist discourse in the country Laws and regulations in the realm of political participation and their development through reform Declared goals of political reform as portrayed by regime discourse
Source: Author			

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