

CONTROLLING ARAB SPRING: TUNISIAN AND JORDANIAN STRATEGIES AND THEIR RESULTS

Controlando a primavera árabe: as estratégias tunisiana e jordaniana e seus resultados

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Introduction

The present article aims to study the governmental strategies to control the popular uprisings that marked the year of 2011 in the Middle Eastern region. Its main concern will be considering the immediate state answer to the protests witnessed in the countries in that region and studying the impact of such answer on the regimes' stability. To better analyze the different patterns of interaction between the government and the people and the ways the former tries to control and undermine the latter's insurrection initiatives, this paper will focus on two different cases and try to point out the factors that influenced the outcomes witnessed. The comparison will be first centered in the mechanisms employed by the states and it will deal later with the possible reasons for their success or failure.

In the first section, the Tunisian case will be explored, mainly through a historical and political approach. The roots of instability, the fast growth of the unrest, the weak and unsuccessful state attempts to control the mobilization, and the overthrow of the President are the main points to be analyzed. After that, the Jordanian successful maintenance of stability will be discussed, pointing out elements that have played major

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roles in the undermining of the moderated protests in the kingdom. The reasons for the long-term stability of this monarchy will be the focus of the analysis.

The events covered in the case studies starts at the countries' independence and goes to the major demonstrations in 2010 and 2011. This choice was made so as to comprehend the creation of the countries' current state apparatus its consolidation and its answer to political challenges, especially the recent demonstrations. .This article aims to analyze how two Middle Eastern countries dealt with the Arab Spring and shed more light to the studies on the different effects of this phenomenon

The Tunisian Republic

The territory that nowadays belongs to Tunisia was inhabited and dominated by different peoples throughout its history. The domination by Ottomans and the later French imperialism were the two last periods in which the Tunisian people was formally controlled by foreign forces. However, the regimes that followed the country's independence on March 20th 1956 were far different from the dream of freedom, which was witnessed in the Tunisian struggle against French domination and later against the Bey regime in 1957 (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 2012b).

Habib Bourguiba, who was the main leader of the Tunisian independence movement, ruled without focusing on the people's needs, and the stability of his 30-year presidency was based mainly on the initially good economic results that graced the whole Middle Eastern region until the 1970s and 1980s. The international crisis that started in 1973 and the policies adopted to solve its socioeconomic consequences were responsible for a wave of discontentment in most Middle Eastern countries, including Tunisia. In 1987 the prime-minister, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, seized the power after the former President was declared unfit to rule, in what was later called a "bloodless coup" (IHS JANE'S, 2009).

Ben Ali's government managed to control people's unrest and diminish its unfortunate socioeconomic conditions for some time. However, many of the bad political practices of the former President have been kept, such as fraudulent elections - in which Ben Ali never obtained less than 80% of the votes-, and repression of the

opposition (IHS JANE'S, 2009). The deterioration of work and social conditions in the country led to a new outbreak of protests at the end of 2010, started by the self-immolation of an unemployed young man. The proliferation of the protests finally led Ben Ali to flee Tunisia and seek asylum in Saudi Arabia on January 14th 2011.

The Tunisian constitution sets the bases for a Presidential republic, in which the President is the head of both state and government. Elections were being held every five years for the presidency, and the maximum number of terms, formerly three, was extinguished in 2004, allowing Ben Ali to reach his fifth term in 2009, before being toppled. The elections' results had been constantly accused of fraud by the opposition, and the discontentment with the regime only grew bigger, with an important factor being Ben Ali's dispute with the Islamist groups and the banishment of Islamist parties (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 2012b). The former President increased his unpopularity with Muslim groups by reinforcing the banishment of the hijab in public offices and by persecuting even moderated Islamic groups.

According to the rentier state² definition (Beblawi and Luciani, 1987), Tunisia cannot be classified at first glance as a rentier state, since its oil reserves are not extensive. However, the effects of the rise in oil prices, such as a greater flow of aid from oil-rich Arab countries, allowed Tunisia to maintain some rentier state practices. The maintenance of Ben Ali's rule, and previously Bourguiba's, relied strongly on neopatrimonialist practices. Ben Ali's government was marked by patronage and nepotism, which were used in order to ensure that the main political posts were filled by men -and sometimes women- of his trust and to pay for their loyalty to the regime. Therefore, his wife's and his own families were the main controllers of the political and business sectors in Tunisia (HIBOU; HULSEY, 2006).

A second element that contributed to the stability of the regime was the maintenance of certain levels of economic prosperity and stability, obtained by Ben

² A rentier state is a state that depends on rents which are externally obtained. Few individuals are involved in the economic activities that are responsible for the country's GDP and governmental budget. As taxes play a minor role in composing the governmental budget, the rulers enjoy a greater freedom of action, since the people is strongly dependent on subsidies and other kinds of aid provided by the central government (BEBLAWI, 1987, LUCIANI, 1987).

Ali's policies (BELLIN, 2004). These were successful in providing the middle class the encouragement not to turn against the government. Another important factor that contributed to the regime survival was the strong repression of the most different opposition elements. Ben Ali and his cabinet tried to control all aspects of civil society through security-motivated reasons. The alleged purpose of containing terrorism was used to condemn and dismantle opposition groups. Similar reasons were employed to pass a law in 1998 that turned the membership in all NGO mandatorily open. This law was used against the Tunisian Humans Rights League (LTDH), one of the main denouncers of the Human Rights violations performed by the old regime (IHS JANE'S, 2009).

The first governmental answer to the December 2010 protests was a strong repression through the military and the police. Censorship against national and foreign press was also intensified, reaching the internet and the virtual social networks, appointed by some as a facilitator of the opposition movement (KOPLOW, 2011). However, this strategy proved soon to be ineffective as the military refused to continue attacking the people, and the protests got stronger. Since the Tunisian military expenditures were traditionally very low, and its main officers were kept in a very distant position from the political decision-making center, this sector did not have any strong encouragement to defend the regime. Besides, Ben Ali also tried to keep the military weak as to reduce the threat it might represent to his rule (COOK, 2011).

With the protests' escalation, the government soon had to change its strategy, starting to make concessions and promises to the people. First, Ben Ali tried to increase the people's expectations towards his regime by promising more jobs and the release of political detainees, both promises being really vague in terms of their implementation. The failure of this attempt led him to deal with his regime, first pledging not to seek a sixth term, then promising earlier elections. Finally, his last measure was to sack all his ministers in an attempt to show his commitment to a new regime, turning against his main supporters (THE ECONOMIST, 2011). However, his rule was unsustainable and two days later he fled to Saudi Arabia.

The revolutionary process in Tunisia, beginning with the self-immolation in December 17th, reached its main result in four weeks, lasting until the elections were assured, and the maintenance of elements from Ben Ali's rule was avoided. The protests' strength was very impressive, as the Tunisian regime was seen as one of the most stable in the Middle East. However, some elements that might not have been usually verified to create that impression might explain the success of the "Jasmine Revolution". For example, the lack of religious legitimacy, being this element fiercely fought by Ben Ali and his party, turned it easy for the protesters to change from their normal passive position toward strong rebellious actions (KOPLOW, 2011). The failure of the Tunisian government's attempts to undermine the opposition was not witnessed in the Jordanian case, which will be examined in the following section.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

After the Ottoman defeat in World War I, the former territory of its Empire was divided and put under the League of Nations mandate system. The mandate over the region that now belongs to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was given to the United Kingdom, together with what now correspond to Israel, Gaza, Jerusalem and the West Bank. The mandate was by then called Palestine and Transjordan and lasted until 1922, when the UK divided the two regions, creating the Emirate of Transjordan, under the semiautonomous rule of the Hashemite Prince Abdullah. The Hashemites are a family which is originally from the Saudi Arabian region of Hejaz and which is believed to be Prophet Muhammad's direct descendent. The Prince's rule was successful in maintaining stability, allowing him to maintain his rule when in 1946 the British mandate over Transjordan was finished, creating the Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 2012a).

Through the 1946 Constitution, the former emirate became a constitutional monarchy, with constitutionally ensured great competences to the executive power. Jordan was on the Palestinian side in the defense of its sovereignty and throughout the wars against Israel. In 1949 the West Bank was put under the rule of Jordan, deepening one of the main issues in the Jordanian internal politics, the strong presence of

Palestinians and the consequent disputes between its two main social groups, East and West Bankers, for political influence and benefits (RATH, 1994). The kingdom's name was then changed in order to include the new people who were incorporated to the state, becoming the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, name that lasts until the present.

The opposition grew stronger with time, being the inclusion of West Bankers and other Palestinians held by many accountable for this phenomenon. This growth of pressure from the opposition, together with the assassination of King Abdullah in 1951 and the transfer of power to the palace group³, led to some changes in the political system, culminating in the adoption of a new Constitution on January 2nd 1952 (RATH, 1994). The 1952 Constitution⁴ granted more power and important freedoms to the Jordanian people and established the current political system in Jordan (RATH, 1994, CIA, 2012a).

During King Hussein's reign, Abdullah's grandson, Jordan joined the other Arab countries in their fight against Israel and for the Palestine cause. During the Six-Days War in 1967, Jordan lost the control over the West Bank and its part of Jerusalem to Israel. However, the flow of Palestinian refugees only grew stronger (BRYNEN, 1992). The 1980s crisis also inflicted important effects on Jordan, which was forced to make some economic policy changes following the IMF encouraged program. The socioeconomic effects of these measures were just as catastrophic in Jordan as in Tunisia, and so, the deeply affected lower classes protested against their poor standards of living in what became known as the bread riots. These social movements were responded by the government with economic measures in order to improve its population's conditions. Even though the people claimed almost exclusively for better economic conditions, the government, in a cautionary move, promoted some kind of political liberalization with the king's compromise with the transfer of some

³ The palace group was composed by traditional allies of the monarchy. During the period that followed the assassination of King Abdullah, his oldest son, Talal, was the official monarch, but the general climate in the kingdom was of uncertainty, granting influence to the palace group. This atmosphere was dissolved when Talal's son, Hussein, became King in 1953 (RATH, 1994).

⁴ The Constitution of 1952 lasted until today, but was subject of many amendments (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 2012a).

competences to the other powers and with the concession of more independence to those (WIKTOROWICZ, 2000).

Hussein's reign was marked by an increasing alignment with Western forces, mainly the US, and, even though it was not so well received by some sectors of the population, the economic benefits that this relation allowed were important to ensure economic and, thus, political stability. His succession was marked by some dispute between his brother and his son, but the latter triumphed and managed to gain the support from the former's followers. King Abdullah II, who is still in power, kept many of his father's policies and promised to continue and deepen the economic and political opening process his father started (ANDONI, 2000).

The Jordanian political system gives the executive power the authority to sign and execute all laws. Even though the Parliament has the capacity of overriding his veto power in the law formulation process, if two thirds of both houses agree on that, the Parliament can be dissolved by the monarch (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 2012a). The main sources of legitimacy of the Jordanian King are based on its religious importance, since his family is claimed to be direct descendent from the Prophet himself, and the maintenance of economic stability. The main movements of opposition so far have focused on the improvement of social and economic conditions, but seldom treated political structural questions with greater strength. However, the Hashemite Kings have been implementing what was called "defensive democratization", at least since the riots of 1989, creating an overall atmosphere of good will from the monarch towards the not so strongly manifested aspirations of the people for more freedom (ROBINSON, 1998).

Nevertheless, the instruments of control of the social mobilization used by the monarchy are very strong. First of all, even though Jordan cannot be classified as a full rentier state, because of its scarce oil reserves, the normal practices of rentier states in the domestic level are extensively used in Jordan, also because of the effect of external aid from, initially, Arab countries and later also Western powers, turning Jordan into a

so-called induced allocative state⁵ (BRYNEN, 1992). Therefore, social elements such as patronage and neopatrimonialism are strongly present in the Jordanian society. Much of the opposition to the regime has been so far co-opted into the government.

Besides the co-optation of challengers to its rule, the Jordanian political regime has also developed strong juridical systems to turn the organization of any kind of political opposition increasingly difficult. The Law of Public Meetings “stipulates that individuals must obtain permission to hold public meetings, defined as ‘any meeting called to discuss political affairs’” (WIKTOROWICZ, 2000, p. 50). Meanwhile, the Law of Societies and Social Organizations, besides establishing composition requirements for any social organization, requests all kinds of groupings to register in the ministry that tackles the affairs they allegedly discuss (WIKTOROWICZ, 2000). Through both laws, the government creates bureaucratic means of controlling the social mobilization in the country, imposing obstacles to a free civil society.

The Arab Spring protests were also present in Jordan, since the economic grievances other Arab countries’ populations face are also a problem in the kingdom. However, the protests in Jordan did not focus on the King or its regime, but rather blamed the Prime Minister, Samir al-Rifai, who was very unpopular among the Jordanians, for their grievances and called for new economic policies. The way politics are conducted in Jordan allows the citizens to criticize the government without criticizing the regime, nor the King, even though the latter is the real responsible for the measures taken and the real power-holder (DANIN, 2011).

The state response to the protests incurred seldom in physical violence. Even though very strong measures were taken, such as the dissolution of the Parliament, the King refused to allow violent crackdowns against his population, since he did not want to relate his reign to unnecessary extreme violence (YOM, 2011a). This can partly explain the reason why the protests do not focus on the end of monarchy. However, some authors believe that the people also fear that a change of focus towards the end of

⁵ Allocative states are states that develop strategies that are similar to rentier states’, but whose resources to undertakes such measures come from rentier states, having, therefore, more trouble to sustain rentier policies (LUCIANI, 1987).

the monarchical system in Jordan might have led to a stronger and more violent attack against the protesters (FOREIGN POLICY, 2011).

The main strategy consisted in undermining the motivations for protesting, co-opting the main protesters and, more importantly, making concessions to the popular demands and promising policies to promote better life conditions. The position of Prime Minister was twice emptied in the 2011: first Samir Rifai and his whole cabinet were fired in February⁶; then, it was the turn of his successor, Marouf al-Bakhit, who did not manage to satisfy the popular demands and was also sacked in October (YOM, 2011b). Besides, each change of Prime Minister was followed by strong promises of new policies. First, the government committed to grant more subsidies and raises to civil salaries; then, it was promised that the ban on access to some websites from government offices would be ceased, and that the Law of Public Meetings would be softened. However, these pledges were not completely fulfilled (DUDLEY, 2011). The main concession to the protests was the adoption of amendments to the Constitution in August, granting more power and freedom to the judiciary (US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 2012a). The protests have not set as a goal the end of Abdullah II's reign, and the government managed to keep them in a stable and not regime-threatening level.

Comparison

The analysis of both cases allows us to highlight some of the elements of the two countries' history that can be useful in understanding their current situation. Their different trajectories were marked by some common characteristics that can be described as the main elements that define politics in the Middle East. The presence of autocratic regimes, patrimonialist and neopatrimonialist practices, strong governmental control over the society, and rentier-state policies are some of the features that can be used to include these two countries in the Middle Eastern state model. However, even though Middle Eastern countries present to some degree all these characteristics, their

⁶ The practice of sacking the Prime Minister in moment of popular unrest has also been employed by Abdullah II's father, Hussein. Interestingly Rifai's father, Zeid, was object of this strategy in 1989, when he filled the same post, and the riots resulting from the change in oil prices emerged (YOM, 2011b).

political scenarios are very different, and these distinctions probably play an important role in the definition of the outcomes to the social movements witnessed in the region.

As stated above, even though the state legitimacy sources and strategies to maintain their rule strong are very different, their ways of tackling the 2011 uprisings were very similar. The reasons for that, however, are different: while Tunisia had to give up from violently responding to the protests because of the military refusal to keep on fighting their compatriots, Jordan avoided an aggressive crackdown of the manifestations so as not to encourage an image of a violent repressive state. Therefore, both regimes relied intensively on promises of better conditions and on symbolic gestures towards these promises, like sacking government officials and rescheduling elections for earlier periods. Both governments deployed cooptation strategies in order to take the main leaders of the opposition movements out of the streets. However, the Jordanian historical deployment of such strategies was very important in the use of this maneuver against the new movement, while the Tunisian inexperience in this sense contributed to the failure of his cooptation attempts.

The reasons for the similarities in the strategies to put an end to the protests probably are influenced by the social and political backgrounds of the two countries, mainly the neopatrimonialist and rentier state practices and the authoritarianism of both regimes. However, some important motivations for the adoptions of such measures were caused, as explained above, by different factors in each case. This is probably one of the reasons why the results of the deployment of those strategies were so different in each case.

When thinking about the reasons why the results of such strategies were so different from one country to the other, many factors have to be considered, and a scale of importance cannot be easily established. First of all, the sources of legitimacy of the regimes have to be analyzed. The Jordanian King has a strong source of legitimacy on its historical claim of being descendent of the Prophet. Together with the permission of Islamist organizations, in levels that cannot pose a threat to regime, this element leads to a very strong belief on the monarch's right to rule, and very few Jordanians dare to challenge this right. Similar phenomena are witnessed in the other Arab monarchies,

which have all resisted to the Arab Spring (SADIKI, 2012). Meanwhile, the Tunisian former President's strong struggle against the Islamist elements in its society has been responsible for a lack of this source of legitimacy in his regime. Therefore, when the situation in Tunisia deteriorated the people had no reason not to blame the President himself for the poor conduction of the country's economy and then demand a new government.

King Abdullah II and his father have, at least since the riots of 1989, tried to maintain a good image of their reigns and a general idea of a long gradual process of democratization among their people. The long standing "defensive democratization" has been a Jordanian monarchy's strong characteristic (ROBINSON, 1998). This policy, however, never prevented the King from privileging his main supporters and from co-opting the main opposition elements. Meanwhile, Ben Ali focused on concentrating all the main political positions within his circle of trust and weakening all elements seen as threats to his rule. This practice was also responsible for the fast change of sides witnessed in the military sector and its previous weak results in the crackdown of protests.

Nevertheless, the promotion of a good image among the people towards the Jordanian monarch shall not be viewed as a simple gesture of good will, but as part of a bigger strategy. It shall also be mentioned that just like Tunisia, Jordan also had laws that tried to prevent civil society to be independent and to act towards popular goals. The main difference between the two states in this sense is just the formalization and the effectiveness of their policies.

Jordan and Tunisia presented autocratic political systems, and their decision-making capacities were concentrated in one individual, the Jordanian King and the Tunisian President. Despite that the different power structure in these countries granted Jordan a scapegoat strategy that did not work in the Tunisian case. Both rulers dismissed major officials to try to please the protesters and to encourage them to believe in the good will of their governors towards change and to make them leave the streets. However, the Jordanian system was a lot more effective in this way, as the existence of a Prime Minister, which is changed in determinate situations, allows the regime to

change same faces in the government without really changing its policies, even giving the population the false idea that they have the power of determining their rulers, as the protests were responsible for two changes of Prime Ministers within eight months. The same cannot be said about Tunisia, where the presidential attempt to change his cabinet was only a step towards his own resignation. Being the President the main public figure with no other figure with comparable power or public exposure, there was no one to be blamed for all the problems that shadowed Tunisia's future.

After analyzing these variables, one can assume that the main difference between the two cases relies on the image they disseminate among their people, thus the legitimacy they can attribute to their own rule. This element is determined by all the other aspects discussed above and is probably one of the main causes for the different results of the two cases. Even though both countries deployed similar strategies to control the demonstrations, just Amman was able to survive the Arab Spring. There the claims of the opposition against the rulers was successfully tackled, and the ruler keeps increasing its sources of strength by broadcasting an image of good will toward the political liberalization process.

Conclusion

By analyzing the two Arab countries, Tunisia and Jordan, one can sure learn about the interaction between government and society that are witnessed in the Middle East. Those two cases are representative of some of the main differences among the Arab countries, even though, like all comparative politics paper, this one could not elucidate all the aspects that define politics in those countries. However, the comparison between a monarchy and a republic is very important to better understand the distinct results of the 2011 protests over the different regimes in this region. Even though the monarchical system does not ensure stability to a ruler, it has proven to be helpful in the regime struggle to maintain itself. We should not, however, undermine the importance of granting legitimacy to its rule and the maintenance of an image among the people of good will from the ruler. We cannot say that those are the reasons for the diametrical results in Tunisia and Jordan, but they sure played an important role.

Nevertheless, we shall not completely discard the possibility of changes in the Jordanian political scenario, even though the current conditions do not suggest it. The protests there have been twice responsible for the change of Prime Minister, and new policies keep being promised by the state. However, it is not believed that the political situation will be improved so soon. The monarch still holds the power of changing the government as he sees fit. The current Prime Minister, Abdullah Ensour, does not have the power to change the system and sure will be fired if the monarch sees it as a necessary measure to ensure the regime continuance (YOM, 2011b, BRAND, 2011). Meanwhile, in Tunisia the results of the protests have pointed towards a more free and democratic direction. The new elections held in October 2011 witnessed the victory of Moncef Marzouki, one the oppositionists who were exiled during Ben Ali's presidency. The new government is marked by the inclusion of groups, which were formerly prohibited of taking part in the political processes (KENNER, 2011). This sure is an optimistic sign for the future. However, Tunisia still has to deal with the poor economic conditions that were responsible for the beginning of the protests, and the maintenance of its stability still has to be assured. In 2013 new challenges to the democratic process established in Tunis arose, as clashes between different social groups have been reported, leaving the future of Tunisia's regime uncertain, while 2014 has started with the approval of a new Constitution for the country (ZELIN, 2013, BBC, 2014).

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Abstract

In the year of 2011 a strong movement for change was witnessed in the Middle Eastern region. The strategies adopted by Tunisian and Jordan governments to control demonstrations and the results of these strategies are the subject of this paper. By studying both countries' history and political system, it will seek to explain how they employed similar strategies. By analyzing the effects of such strategies and the political background they were deployed in, it aims to point out reasons for the different outcomes witnessed.

Keywords

Arab Spring; Tunisia; Jordan

Resumo

O ano de 2011 testemunhou um forte movimento por mudança na região do Oriente Médio. As estratégias adotadas por Tunísia e Jordânia para controlar os protestos e os resultados que tais estratégias alcançaram são o objeto deste artigo. Ao estudar a história e o sistema político dos dois países, buscar-se-á explicar a adoção de estratégias similares. Ao analisar os efeitos dessas estratégias e o pano de fundo em que elas foram desenvolvidas, tem-se por objetivo elencar razões para a obtenção de resultados tão distintos.

Palavras-chave

Primavera Árabe; Tunísia, Jordânia

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