

Conclusions

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When the Arab uprisings occurred over a decade ago in North Africa, the world watched in awe hoping to witness a political transformation in the region that would enable century-long autocratic regimes to evolve into free democracies. The images of protesters crowding the streets of Tahrir Square in Egypt and Habib Bourguiba Boulevard in Tunisia circulated among Western democracies where renown leaders, politicians, and civil society actors welcomed the calls for freedom. A new era of economic prosperity, political transformation, and social peace seemed set to become the new normal in a region where endemic corruption, conflicts, and repression were a daily occurrence.

Yet, a decade later, greater political instability, social unrest, and security threats permeate the region. The aspirations of many that flourishing democracies would emerge as a consequence of the uprisings faded. North Africa still faces many daunting challenges, among which transnational terrorism, illegal migrant smuggling, poor local governance, and lack of basic infrastructure pose serious threats to North Africa's economic, social, and political development.

As Zoubir and Abderrahmane note in chapter 1, fragmented regional politics are one of the many challenges. Since the Arab uprisings, national leaders have failed yet again to address their people's needs, namely greater political participation, good governance, and human security. Most North African countries are still ruled by authoritarian leaders or have failed

to produce outcomes for greater political stability. Algeria, for one, faced a renewed wave of unrest in 2019 when the *Hirak* movement led millions of Algerians to demand the resignation of then-President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. While the movement achieved the implementation of a new road map that led to *quasi-democratic* presidential and legislative elections and a constitutional referendum, the country still remains under strict military rule. Morocco also experienced its own *Hirak* in 2016; despite constitutional reforms, Zoubir and Abderrahmane note, Morocco remains an “authoritarian monarchy”.

Tunisia may represent the saddest chapter yet when it comes to quasi democracies, democratic rule, and fragmented politics. Following nearly a decade of successful democratic rule after the fall of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia may be undergoing a new form of authoritarianism: the current president, Kais Saied, froze parliament on July 25, 2021, and sacked the prime minister to fight alleged corruption among the ruling class elite. To this day, President Saied still rules by decree and is showing no signs of giving up power.

Libya is also no stranger to chaos and political instability. After three civil wars, a NATO intervention, and endless negotiations between the United Nations and local authorities, the country is still in a shambles. Elections are upcoming (scheduled for December 2021), but it is uncertain whether local elites are ready for them to take place despite international pressure, as Zoubir and Abderrahmane point out.

Trust for state institutions in North Africa has never been strong. Yet, as Biganzoli and Gagliardi note in chapter 2, the situation has managed to worsen in the past decade. “North Africa (and the MENA region more broadly) is one of few places in the world that has lost ground in terms of good governance,” despite initial progress in the immediate aftermath of the Arab uprisings. Meanwhile, Arab Barometer data from 2019 and 2020 indicates that only 25% of North African citizens are content with their governments, and that personal rights and freedoms have experienced significant setbacks. Public

administration across the region is still largely underperforming as underscored by the poor quality of services and policies delivered.

Climate change and the need to transition toward renewable energy sources together represent another major obstacle for the region. In chapter 3, Liga calls North Africa one of “the world’s most susceptible regions to global warming.” While countries such as Morocco and Egypt have made significant progress in adding renewable energy capacity to help meet this challenge, others like Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia are not doing as well.

Algeria, for one, is heavily dependent on oil exports given its configuration as a rentier state. Even though energy transition for Algeria is “quite urgent”, as Liga notes, the country’s plan to reach 4,000 MW of renewables by 2030 is all but stalled as none of the necessary infrastructure has been built. Meanwhile, the protracted conflict in Libya has hindered all concrete plans for the country to adopt a comprehensive strategy for a renewable energy transition. Neighboring Tunisia’s current share of renewables is stuck at a mere 6 percent of total energy supply.

Another key challenge facing North Africa in the coming decade is the need for regional cities to become sustainable hubs able to provide vital benefits to their citizens. As Abdullah and Elgendy note in chapter 4, “Cities have the potential to deliver economic, social, and environmental benefits to their residents,” and thus bring about an improved quality of life. North Africa’s urban transition has only recently been embraced by policymakers as critical for a prosperous and sustainable African future. The global average of urbanization in 2019 was about 56%, and North Africa reached that level that year, growing by almost two-thirds since the 1960s. However, North African cities do not provide citizens with the array of benefits typical of urbanization elsewhere. Unemployment and poverty are still high across the region. As Abdullah and Elgendy observe: “Today, North African cities are far from achieving sustainable and inclusive economic growth critical to improving living

standards for all by creating decent work opportunities with a fair income, security in the workplace, and social protection”.

The inability of North African governments to tap into their large youth population, mainly due to their failure to create enough jobs, represents another source of potential instability for the future of the region. As Kabbani and Ben Mimoune point out, the Arab uprisings were largely spurred by younger generations asking for greater job security, better futures, and more social representation. Well before these movements, unemployment among the youth in North Africa was among the highest in the world. However, as Kabbani and Ben Mimoune highlight, 2011 did not bring about the change many had sought. Only Morocco and Egypt were able to curb the high unemployment rates among their youth, but these still remain high in comparison to the global average. In contrast, Tunisia’s youth unemployment is still as high as before the Arab Spring, and Libya’s youth unemployment has reached an unprecedented level of 49 percent, given the prolonged state of conflict in the country.

Unfortunately, regional cooperation in North Africa also remains a challenge. Although many experts and academics alike agree on the high potential for the region to become an economic hub, a mere 4 percent of the region’s trade occurs across North African countries, as noted by Zoubir and Abdelrahmane. The untapped potential for cooperation even encompasses the security realm, where the lack of collaboration and the protracted intrastate conflicts make the region prone to the influence of external powers. This could not be more evident than in the case of war-torn Libya; since the fall of Qaddafi in 2011, Egypt, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, and Turkey have all attempted to exert influence on the future of the country, either through direct military intervention or by aiding fighters on the ground. Given the high stakes involved in the Libyan conflict, as Jesner and Mens write, it is highly unlikely “that any single candidate or body could unify Libya’s fissiparous body politic”.

These challenges all paint a gloomy picture for the future of North Africa. The 2011 revolts brought about the hope – especially among Westerners – that a call for dignity, pluralism, and democracy was rising from North African citizens. Yet, ten years on, it is questionable whether these hopes were real, or whether the West misunderstood them to be more than just a short chapter in the history of these nations. Perhaps Western countries projected upon them their hope that democracy and freedom can, indeed, bring greater prosperity for the citizens of these nations. Tunisia is facing greater challenges than ever, with political instability and high unemployment rates still rocking the country. Many Tunisians long for the time when authoritarian regimes brought about job security and political stability. Democracy in Egypt led the Muslim Brotherhood to take power under Mohamed Morsi, only to see his demise two years later and the return of an authoritarian regime.

However, every reality can be perceived as either a glass half empty or half full, depending on the lens through which one chooses to analyze phenomena. Democracy can be best viewed as a long journey with many “bumps” on the way, and the challenges North Africa faced this past decade are merely obstacles in a greater trajectory toward freedom and prosperity. No Western democracy became such without undergoing bloodshed, political entanglements, economic downturns, and waves of social unrest. North Africa is on a similar path and trajectory, as many of the authors of this report point out. The Tunisian people, as Zoubir and Abdelrrahmane suggest, are equipped with “the ability to forge a national consensus” that will enable them to move past Tunisia’s latest shift toward authoritarian rule. Even though corruption is still prominent, countries in the region such as Morocco and Tunisia have made important steps forward to strengthen their anti-corruption legal frameworks, say Biganzoli and Gagliardi. Moreover, many countries in North Africa are making significant headway in the transition toward renewable energy, a leap which “could open new opportunities for sustainable economic growth and regional

integration”, Liga notes. North African cities’ socioeconomic and infrastructure development is enabling these urban centers to become “emerging transnational political” agencies, write Abdullah and Elgendy, while the upcoming “youth bulge” foreseen between 2025 and 2040 will give the region the opportunity to tap into the benefits of a young, educated, and healthy generation. The hopes and dreams raised by the 2011 revolts are not dead yet, but simply postponed.