Revisiting Political Culture: Libyan and Tunisian Post-Revolutionary Transitions

Revisiting Political Culture: Comparing Libyan and Tunisian Post-Revolutionary Transition

Libya and Tunisia's post-revolutionary democratic transitions have resulted in Tunisian success and Libyan failure. A democratic political culture in Tunisia and a lack thereof in Libya can potentially explain their disparate experiences in creating and maintaining democratic institutions. Tunisia's democratic heritage, via political traditions, laid the groundwork for its democratic success signaled by free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections in 2014. Libya's lack of such democratic values have resulted in the country's corresponding lack of performing democratic institutions, which has been demonstrated through the nation's 2014-15 deterioration into two rival governments following levels of violence unseen since its 2011 revolution. Using a political culture approach to study the cases of Libya and Tunisia reveals specific political values needed for institutional effectiveness, possible confounding environmental factors, as well as the limits of applying democratic institutions universally.

The Case of Tunisia: a Pro-Democratic Political Culture Yields Democratic Institutions

Tunisia has experienced the most successful post-Arab Spring transition, evidenced by its successful October and November 2014 elections. Before arriving at this success, Tunisia completed great democratic institutional achievements. These achievements are rooted in historical and cultural factors.

Tunisia's January 2011 Jasmine Revolution which ended the 23 year rule of dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, began Tunisia's path towards democracy. The revolution occurred due to protests following the self-immolation of an economically frustrated vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi. The protests, which originated as a response to the government's treatment of Bouazizi, grew to include overarching political and economic grievances. The subsequent heavy handed government response led to the eventual ousting of Ben Ali.[1] Tunisia's revolution was the first of the 'Arab Spring', kindling the wider movement which would challenge many other regimes throughout the region.

Following Ben Ali's ouster, the Islamist-leaning Nahda party won the first post-revolution elections and then helmed a coalition government for two years before handing over power to a transitional government. In January 2014 the parties within the transitional government established a new, more inclusive Tunisian constitution. Tunisia's October 2014 parliamentary elections yielded a roughly even outcome for the two major parties, Nidaa Tounes and Nahda, with 85 and 69 seats won, respectively. Overall, Nidaa Tounes received 39% of votes and Nahda received 32%. 60% of registered voters (5.2 million Tunisians—nearly half the population) cast their ballot, giving the new government a wide political mandate.[2] The results of Tunisia's elections were broadly accepted both domestically and by international election observers.

Certain attributes of Tunisia served as possible seeds for the success of its democratic institutions, such as their relatively homogenous population, broad middle class, high level of education, and national history. These traits likely positively influenced the development of Tunisian pro-democratic political culture. But, among these traits, Tunisia's national history is likely the most important. Tunisia's post-colonial development, while authoritarian in nature, did not mirror the violence seen at the hands of Libya's Muammar Gadhafi or Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. Tunisia gained

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independence from France in 1956 peacefully and was then led by Habib Bourguiba for thirty years. Bourguiba's historical role was crucial in forming Tunisia's democratic character as he laid the nation's earlier liberal foundations. Bourguiba advanced liberal and secular policies such as free education and women's emancipation (women's rights in Tunisia are very high relative to the rest of the Arab world). He was anti-Islamic fundamentalist as well, restricting the activities of more conservative Muslims and separating the church and state. Bourguiba also built a strong bureaucracy and a sense of citizenship that many Tunisians still feel today. In 1987 Bourguiba, at the age of 84, was deemed senile by doctors and ousted by Ben Ali. Yet his policies continue on through Tunisian society, thought, and legislation.[3]

Following Bourgiba's rule, Ben Ali continued with a similarly secularist, anti-Islamist stance. Yet Ben Ali proved to be much more corrupt than his predecessor, and by 2011, economic and political grievances erupted into revolution, removing him from power.[4] Following the end of Tunisian authoritarianism, nascent political organizations emerged from Ben Ali's downfall, forming the two major parties in contemporary Tunisian politics: the Beji Caid Sebsi led Nidaa Tounes ("Tunisian Call") young secular party, and the Rachid Gannouchi led Nahda ("Awakening") Islamist party.[5] Both parties are indigenously democratic and respectful of democratic processes, coming from the liberal policy background created inside Tunisian post-colonial authoritarianism, as well as a politically active opposition movement that had attempted to challenge Ben Ali throughout the 2000s.[6]

The Nidaa Tounes and Nahda parties have made efforts to directly foster democracy, such as compromise and inclusion, of which Libyan political leaders failed to pursue, by contrast. The democratic transitions in Libya have seen much conflict centered on rivalries based on former regime supporters or religious identity. In Tunisia such political cleavages have been largely resolved without violence or political marginalization; Tunisian politics have been centered on consensus. On 7 September 2014, the Nahda party publicly retracted itself from the presidential election, indicating an aversion to 'winner take all' styled politics that could be abused and damaging to democracy. Nahda leadership had believed they would win the parliament, and thus did not want to control the presidency as well. Following this withdrawal Tunisia's interim Prime Minister, Medhi Jomaa, also decided against running for office on 17 September, as to support greater executive turnover (in Tunisia's authoritarian past, Bourguiba and Ben Ali long overstayed their constitutionally bound limits to rule). Additionally, following Nidaa Tounes' October 2014 parliamentary victory, the losing Nahda party has remained against extremism and as a firm believer in democracy, as per the stance of the party's leader, Rachid Ghannouchi. Ghannouchi personally telephoned Caid Essebsi to congratulate him on Nidaa Toune's victory.[7]

Tunisia's political culture of dialogue, compromise, and inclusion contrasts with the violence seen in its neighbors. While the post-revolutionary Tunisia has endured targeted assassinations of secular politicians as well as government repression of Islamists, the levels of violence and repression are far lower than those in Libya. Moreover, the military has remained out of political affairs and politicians have not engaged in using political advantages to oppress opponents. Furthermore, in contrast to Libyan (or Egyptian) politicians' bids to stay in power at all costs, the Tunisian Islamist Nahda party agreed to step down in 2013 following a political standoff between the Islamists and secularists caused by the murder of two secular parliamentarians.[8] In Egypt, the army performed the task of removal, lacking a Tunisian-styled concession from its Islamist leader at the time, Mohamed Morsi. While both transitions resulted in transitional governments, animosity was quelled in Tunisia rather than exacerbated. Egypt unraveled into violence under army-rule, Tunisia moved forward with fair, representative elections.

Tunisia's success in contrast to the democratically backsliding elsewhere in North Africa, can be attributed to its political culture of compromise. While North African nations near to Tunisia, such as Egypt and Libya, faced post-revolutionary transitional challenges including institutional gaps, lack of national unity, military involvement in politics, and religious divisions, they also were saddled with less democratic political cultures by way of national history. Tunisia's pro-democratic cultural values pre-empted such challenges by providing the necessary precondition for successful democratic institutions—the actions of both Tunisian politicians and citizenry illustrate this in addressing developmental challenges with democratic methods rather than violence or exclusion. Tunisia's two secular autocrats of Habib Bourguiba and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali built up government institutions which provided a platform for introducing reform, giving enough space for liberal values to exist and grow, despite being dictators. In tandem with the growth of these liberal values was the growth of a Tunisian national identity which has played a role in keeping

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Tunisian political actors civil and conciliatory. Both major parties, Nidaa Tounes and Nahda, have been loyal to legitimate, civil democratic processes.

Each of Tunisia's democratic institutions, including the constitution, parliament, and presidency have benefited from its political culture. The Nahda and Nidaa Tounes parties came together in agreement in order to mint Tunisia's first post-revolutionary constitution, despite the heightened tensions caused by political assassinations. Tunisia's parliament was solidified by its second turnover of power through the results of October 2014's parliamentary elections. The contest resulted in a secularist Nidaa Tounes retaking of the majority, but not at a level of victory that would overpower the minority leader Nahda party. The results were fairly balanced—neither leading parties fears for its survival. Yet even if a vast majority had been achieved, the groups and citizens engaging in politics are still bound by mutual trust and tolerance, as indicated by the conciliatory moves from both sides of the aisle. Lastly, Tunisia's November 2014 presidential election also benefited from Tunisia's political culture, as multiple candidates opted not to run for the sake of the overall process and to keep the Tunisian political system balanced.

While these events at the top of Tunisian politics indicate a solidly pro-democratic political culture, the opinions expressed by the Tunisian people themselves also reveal similar sentiments, as reported by the National Democratic Institute via field reportage involving focus group surveys collected (2012). Among the many sentiments expressed by the respondents (which included items as diverse as economic direction, insecurity, and faith in leadership) were pro-democratic sentiments that valued freedom of expression, public media, voting, fair participation of majority and minority parties, the necessity of opposition and pluralism, and elections as credible grantors of political power. Additionally, the respondents did not express disdain for democracy, but rather for how Tunisian democracy could be bettered by more experienced political candidates, more transparency, and the meeting of deadlines for elections and constitution drafts.[9]

The Case of Libya: A Lack of Pro-Democratic Political Culture Undermines Democratic Institutions

In contrast with Tunisia's success story, Libya's post-revolutionary development process was perhaps the least fertile for viable democratic governance among the North African post-Arab Spring states. In examining Libya's democratic trajectory in the same time period (2011-2014) as Tunisia's successful transition, it is clear that almost none of the same results have materialized. A dysfunctional transitional government stumbled towards its democratic goals. Its executive, legislative, and judicial branches have not engaged in the same style of trust-based, conciliatory, and compromise-based politics as Tunisia. During the 2011 revolution, the National Transitional Council (NTC) formed and in 2012 handed over power to the General National Congress (GNC). In November 2012, a new government, headed by liberal opposition leader Ali Zeidan, was sworn in. During 2013, security issues became problematic, with Zeidan even being kidnapped at one point (but returned safely). In February 2014 mass protests erupted after the GNC failed to disband after its tenure had expired. The GNC claimed it needed more time in office to work on the constitution, and assured forthcoming elections. In March the GNC fired Zeidan for alleged incompetence. Ahmed Maiteg was appointed as his successor.

During the political crisis, a renegade Libyan army general, Khalifa Haftar, launched "Operation Dignity" in an attempt to dislodge Islamist groups from the eastern city of Benghazi, further complicating Libya's transition. Haftar also attempted to take over the parliament, accusing new Prime Minister Maiteg of being allied with Islamist groups. In June 2014 the Supreme Constitutional Court ruled Maiteg's appointment illegal, leading to his resignation. A new parliament was elected into office the same month, in which secularists won by a majority, prompting a campaign of violence by Islamist militants that would last all summer, and eventually force Libya's government from the capital, Tripoli, into exile to the eastern city of Tobruk, close to the border with Egypt (an ally to the secularists). Instead of denouncing such behavior, Islamist-leaning parties in Tripoli then formed a rival government in opposition to the internationally recognized government exiled in Tobruk.

In 2014, Tobruk-based parliament/government was led by liberal-leaning Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thani while the Tripoli-based parliament/government was led by Islamist-leaning Omar al-Hassi. In November of that year, the Supreme Court declared al-Thani's government "illegal" by nullifying the electoral law that put forward the June elections which elected them into office. On 3 November, al-Hassi stated that his political rival al-Thani, was leading

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a government that had "lost its legitimacy". Meanwhile al-Thani publicly endorsed renegade general Haftar's military campaign against Islamists in eastern Libya.

The issue of a Libyan constitution added to the lack of Libyan consensus. Instead of a coalition government agreeably forming a constitution, problems arose during the February 2014 election for the Libyan Constituent Assembly charged with drafting the constitution. In the electoral law for the election of the constituent assembly, women and minority seats were underrepresented, and the law also did not accommodate specific minority issues such as the status of the Tamazight language spoken by Libyan Berbers. Amazigh and Tebu minorities boycotted the elections citing disenfranchisement.[10] [11] As of November, 2015, a proposed constitution has not been put forward by Libya's constitutional commission.

Legitimacy, compromise, and trust have not been found in Libyan political affairs and flimsy, unreliable democratic institutions have resulted. One looks to precedent. Libya's 42-year period of rule under Muammar Gaddafi following his 1969 *coup d'état* was a virtual dark-age for political activity. Libyan officials and citizens did not have experience with politics before the revolution; the nation had never had political parties or political activities prior to its revolution, because attempts at political mobilization were repressed by the Gaddafi regime. In comparison to the pattern of national progress inculcated by Tunisian autocrats; the Libyan citizenry were not given a foundational identity, a sense of being 'Libyan', nor a unity government. Instead, Libya's existence under Gaddafi led the nation on a corrupt bureaucratic development that used offices as political rewards to buy-off any potential adversaries. Following this divide-and-conquer strategy, the regime separated communities from one another in order to solidify Gaddafi rule, eventually growing into a relatively weak state apparatus controlling a patchwork of different ethnic communities. Some towns became rich owing to the bureaucratic ruling elite, but others became destitute. Parallel to this layer of divided patronage was Gaddafi's security forces which instigated and used intra-communal conflicts to expand the regime's power.[12] These efforts divided Libyan society along geographic, ethnic, and class lines. Thus, when Gaddafi fell in Libya's 2011 revolution, many factions went to war with one another based on these divisions that had previously been reined by a central state. Without the colonial-designed "Libya"-shaped nation under any central authority, allegiances of every stripe sought to settle their own scores. Following Gaddafi's downfall, Libya endured geographic and ideological divisions, a lack of an institutional foundation, and continued animosity over former Gaddafi-associates.

Democratic institutions remain elusive without national unity in Libya as political compromise has not occurred. In the country's politically divisive context, both sides fear of being locked out of the other. Each of Tunisia's junctures of democratic success—popularly supported constitutional draft, free, fair, and proportionate parliament and presidency elections—have not evolved into effective or even lasting institutions in Libya, whose leadership lacks both political trust, and faith in their own political system. A "loyal" opposition has yet to form, making politics into just another form of the battles between militias on the streets of Tripoli and Benghazi.

Libya does not have the pro-democratic values needed for democratic success. But, as much as political culture is important for Libya's development, the structural issues specific to Libya's case cannot be ignored. The Libyan context requires analysis of both political cultural factors and the harsh political environment in which they exist and in turn affect such political culture. Tunisia's relatively unified, calm, and peaceful revolution by contrast did not face the same hurdles to governance, or, importantly, the same hurdles to the evolution of a pro-democratic political culture; Libya's Gaddafi, unlike Tunisia's Ben Ali or Bourgiba, did not build up institutions or state apparatuses in a very successful manner, nor did he unify the country. Gaddafi was also much more repressive, not allowing for any pluralism or civil society inside Libya. [13] Moving forward from this perspective, overlaps between endemic structural and cultural factors become apparent in the development of Libyan politics; Libyan political culture is marked by distrust, exclusion, and division, due to Libya's political development prior to the 2011 revolution. These undemocratic values have undermined the survival of Libya's fledgling democratic institutions, which operate in a context of existential conflict rather than political dialogue.

Moreover, the Libyan people's perspectives on democracy, brought into focus by the National Democratic Institute's field research, reveal a lack of pro-democratic values in the populace. While a majority of Libyans were optimistic about their future in 2013, they held beliefs which are incongruent with pro-democratic values. Responders

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overwhelmingly claimed that they believed in both democracy and democratic institutions, but they indicated in certain responses that they did not trust a majority of the political parties, with 59% of responders not trusting *any* political parties. Additionally, a majority of Libyans polled could only identify one of five parties and party leadership. While the 'party' aspect of democracy is not as fundamental as other institutions, it reflects a trend in the Libyan population towards a more cautious stance towards transition, likely due to Libya's context of violent conflict. This stance is also manifest in less tolerance and less inclusion. For example, a majority of Libyans believe women should wear a hijab, with 92% believing the state has the right to tell them to. Additionally, 69% of those polled believed in political exclusion of any citizen previously associated with the Gaddafi regime.[14] These responses indicate a contrast to the Tunisian respondents who were more progressive, and expressed inclusive, tolerant viewpoints.

Democratic institutions have been sought for Libya, and have been haphazardly applied to an environment lacking in real democratic receptivity—both structurally and culturally. These institutions do not make sense for Libya at the nation's current point in its political development; they no longer have legitimacy and are not functioning at a national level. The structural issues blocking Libya's progress towards democratic institutions (or any functional institutions) are the same issues that blocked Libya from undergoing pro-democratic political cultural development—historically deep divisions that appear politically irreparable. Thus, the democratic institutions that have been installed thus far have uncertain fates. It was Gaddafi's prerogative to keep democratic culture from forming (whether or not Gaddafi believed in 'political culture', he certainly achieved its preemption by destroying anything political). As a shift towards trust, tolerance, and political awareness take significant efforts and time, the democratic institutions are likely going to remain shells of real institutions in the near future.

Is the Political Culture Approach Useful?

Libya and Tunisia's post-revolutionary timelines illustrate the importance of political culture as a necessary precondition for the effectiveness and survival of democratic institutions. Tunisia underwent generational changes to its civic culture leading Tunisian politicians and citizens to engage in trustworthy, tolerant, pro-democratic behavior, fulfilling the functional requirements of democratic institutions and assuring their survival. By contrast, Libya underwent a stunted, near-nonexistent political development under Gaddafi. Following his ouster, politicians and citizens are distrustful of parties, engage in zero-sum politics, and use exclusionary practices, undermining the functional requirements of democratic institutions leading to their 2014 split into rival governments hosted by different cities.

National *history*, as a cultural component, greatly shaped both nations' overall political cultures, which set up institutional success or failure. Their histories were mostly paths carved by their respective former autocrats; Bourgiba and Gaddafi steered their countries in different directions, Bourgiba being more liberal. Indeed, Tunisia's pro-democratic values were fostered over the course of their post-independence history that includes the country's nationalistic unification under Bourgiba and an ascension to consensus-based politics that follow the rules of democracy. Transitional political coalitions, constitutions, and parliaments followed and ruled. Libya's less democratic political culture is based on a history of deeply divided communities artificially placed into one nation under Gaddafi's rule, which were then explosively released by a violent revolution. Constitutions and parliaments followed, but were not effective at ruling in the face of unbound divisive forces that had had no previous experience with politics, let alone democracy. This finding parallels those made by other scholars, demonstrating the connection between history/culture and democratic institutions.

The limits to any exploration of political cultural factors, especially towards such a specific concept as democratic institutions, must be acknowledged. Appraising the results of case studies must attempt to account both for what can be known, but also what cannot be known, as limits must be assumed to exist. Evaluating the overall relevance of political culture requires a dissection of democratic transition process in order to separately weigh individual factors that matter most. As it is clear that a lack of political culture undermines Libya's ability to have democratic institutions, the next question is how much does this factor weigh against other structural issues? Interestingly, Libya has a higher GDP, a lower corruption rating, and higher literacy than Tunisia. Yet Tunisia is not undergoing an armed conflict, and endured a relatively bloodless revolution. Such violence has undoubtedly had effects on the outcome of Libya's

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political processes. Perhaps any trust that was initially possible following Gaddafi's rule was trampled by the ensuing violence. To this end, political culture may need more disaggregation, at the risk of over-reduction.

Perhaps expanding the analysis to include democratic *backsliding* could expand the research area as well, as anti-democratic factors challenge the survival of democratic institutions. In Tunisia, the country's circumstances provided relative safety from democratic backsliding. A politically neutral army stayed out of the game of regime change and peaceful civilian means had toppled Ben Ali's regime in contrast to the civil war in Libya. Here we see two potentially unpacked aspects: national military culture and national histories of violence.

After acknowledging potential areas of research to further distinguish between different parts of the countries' political cultures, the findings in Libya's and Tunisia's cases still generally indicate that political culture remains useful as a theoretical approach overall. Pro-democratic values have a demonstrated relationship with democratic institutions, by being needed before democratic institutions can function.

Libya is not ready for democratic institutions, which while being controversial to the international community (and likely the Libyans themselves), is potentially helpful in constructing a more functional transitional model. The political culture required for functioning democratic institutions may need more time to incubate in Libya, warranting the development of a transitional model on the Libyans' own terms. Thus instead of trying to make Libya like Tunisia, through emulating factors conducive to pro-democratic political culture, which may be impossible, perhaps it is necessary to accommodate the present challenges to Libyan political development. Perhaps Libya requires its political actors to use what Libya has at its disposal, balancing Libya's reality of a stalled democratic development with short-term transitional accommodations, such as a less democratic, centrist, strong-state. Indigenous accommodations involving ethnic/tribal groups and overhauling a federalist model, may make more sense in a post-revolutionary context in which imported democracy does not fulfill the necessary roles of post-conflict government.

Analyzing the cases of Libya and Tunisia reveals the important role of political culture in their democratic transitions as well as the pitfalls of applying democratic institutions where a lacking cultural receptiveness negates their functionality. As democratic institutions and culture play different roles in Libya and Tunisia, one universal model is not useful for the two countries. Calibration is required.

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