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Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco
Precarious stabilisation under different circumstances

It was considered a watershed event for the Arab world when the public protests and uprisings of the so-called Arab Spring started in December 2010 and quickly spread across the region. However, with the civil wars in Libya and Syria, the Arab Spring quickly took a bloody turn and the high hopes for a democratic transformation of the region were dashed. Today, the political landscape of North Africa and the Middle East is more diverse than ever.

This chapter looks at the developments that have been taking place in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco over the last four years. Tunisia, and to a lesser extent Egypt, were considered frontrunners of the transformation process. The uprisings led to the downfall of the autocratic rulers Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, followed by a conflictual period of political realignment. The monarchy in Morocco met the turbulence and public protest with steered reforms and a gradual expansion of parliamentary powers. Today, a precarious political stabilisation can be observed in all three countries, albeit with different development prospects.

I. Egypt: Back to square one

In Egypt, Mohammed Mursi, a candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood, won the presidency in the elections after the overthrow of former President Hosni Mubarak in 2012. As early as 2013, however, the military unseated Mursi again after persistent public protests and a growing political polarisation within the country, thereby trying to present itself as the guarantor of public order. Consequently, the Muslim Brotherhood was banned and the sometimes violent protests of its followers were brutally suppressed.[1]

In May 2014, ex-Field Marshall Abdel Fattah El-Sisi was elected as the new President of Egypt and the tradition of former members of military taking political leadership in the country was thus revived. The Muslim Brotherhood has been classified as a terrorist organisation by the new government and also representatives of the secular protest movement against former President Mubarak have been politically marginalised. The right to demonstrate, the right to freedom of expression and freedom of the press are severely limited.[2] Civil society actors feel pressured by the government to abandon critical positions.

As a consequence of the ousting of Mursi and the ensuing governmental crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, a part of the supporter-base of political Islam has turned away from politics and withdrawn from public affairs. However, another part has made for itself the decision that peaceful means are not appropriate to achieve political power and has therefore radicalised. Egypt has witnessed increasing attacks, in particular targeting the security forces. The situation on the Sinai Peninsula has become especially precarious, where rampant socio-economic underdevelopment due to government neglect, organised crime, radical ideologies and armed groups, as well as excessive use of force by the security forces, lead to an intensifying destabilisation.[3] The group Ansar al-Bait Maqdis, one of militant Islamist groups operating on the Sinai, has declared its al-

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[1] Human Rights Watch, *Egypt*, 2013.
[2] Kouddous, *Egypt's 1984*, 2014.
[3] Alexandrani, *ISIS in Egypt's Sinai*, 2015.

legiance to the 'Islamic State', which is active in Syria and Iraq.

While on the domestic political level the struggle for power has been resolved in favour of the military and thus the old establishment, an increasing deterioration of the situation in the field of internal security can be observed. The traditional security means prove inapt to solve this problem. As long as the societal trenches and lines of conflict are not bridged politically – and, unfortunately, there is currently little hope for this – the security situation will not improve. Moreover, Egypt's basic socio-economic problems, which were an essential factor motivating the uprisings in 2011, continue to persist and can only be held in check thanks to massive financial support from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.[4] Politically prestigious large-scale infrastructure projects, such as New Suez Canal endeavour and the construction of a new capital for Egypt east of Cairo, hardly seem the appropriate instruments to generate sustainable economic growth.[5]

II. Tunisia: The democratic project continues

Unlike Egypt, Tunisia has become internationally respected and renowned as the Arab model country of democratic transition. However, also the Tunisian transformation process has turned out anything but easy and straightforward. The murdering of two secular opposition politicians shook the nascent political system in 2013 and led, combined with the difficult economic situation, to a protracted political crisis. This crisis was not overcome until the beginning of 2014, when the political contenders agreed on the establishment of a transitional care-taker-government and a new constitution was adopted by public referendum. In this process, especially the Islamist Ennahda party, which had previously led the first elected government after the fall of Ben Ali,

had to make concessions. Arguably, the negative experience of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt might have played an important role for Ennahda's leadership. In the fall of 2014, parliamentary and presidential elections took place in Tunisia, which can be considered fair and transparent. Remarkably, with Nidaa Tounes, a secular party became the most powerful force in the political system, which is also a melting pot for representatives of the old establishment. Hence, representatives of the old regime have gained influence in Tunisia's new political system by democratic means and through the ballot box. Symptomatic of this is also Beji Caid Essebsi's victory in the presidential elections. Nevertheless, even Nidaa Tounes could not win an absolute majority in parliament and therefore had to form a coalition government with Ennahda, the second strongest force in the Tunisian parliament.

The security situation in Tunisia has undergone a change in recent years, too. In particular, the negative regional environment in Libya and Algeria has had a massive impact on the security situation. The attacks on the National Museum in Tunis in March 2015 show how fragile the situation is. In addition, up to 3,000 Tunisians are fighting on the side of the IS in Syria and Iraq. Terrorism represents a significant risk for the stability of Tunisian domestic politics. The government is faced with the delicate task of finding an appropriate response to these challenges that on the one hand provides for a robust security policy, while on the other hand respects the requirements of the nascent political culture of pluralism and tolerance.

In addition to that, Tunisia's socio-economic problems also still exist. Attacks like the one in Tunis pose not only a risk to political stability, but are also a serious setback for the slowly recovering tourism sector. The economy in general is still suffering from the rev-

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[4] Al-Arabiya News, *Gulf states offer $12.5 billion aid to Egypt*, 2015.
[5] cf. Roll and Sailer, *Auf Sand gebaut*, 2015.

olutionary turbulences. Realignments in economic affairs are still not settled, and cooperative practices between employers and employees sometimes still need to be negotiated.

III. Morocco: Smart authoritarianism or a functioning monarchy?

Despite political and socio-economic difficulties, the Moroccan political system turned out to be remarkably stable in the face of the public protests that started in February 2011. Unlike the 'defective' democracies of Tunisia and Egypt, Morocco proved to be a 'functioning' monarchy. The political system therefore enjoys a much higher legitimacy, which is especially connected with King Mohammed VI. The king found it easier to distance himself from the failures of the government and initiate gradual political reforms that aimed at stabilising the system. He inaugurated a reform commission that proposed a new constitution that was endorsed by a public referendum in July 2011. The new constitution considerably expands the powers of the parliament vis-à-vis the government. Yet, Morocco's political system is still far from being a constitutional monarchy and the old rules of the game – according to which the actual political and economic power rests with the king and his entourage – are still in place.[6] Morocco successfully upholds its reputation of being an example for 'smart' and 'enlightened' authoritarianism.[7]

Morocco's relative political calm could soon be challenged should the effects of the civil war in Syria and Iraq and Libya arrive there too. According to estimates by the Moroccan government, up to 1,000 Moroccans are fighting for the 'Islamic State' in Syria.[8]

The Royal House tries to counter regional radicalisation through increased diplomatic efforts, relying especially on its religious soft power.[9] The success of these initiatives remains to be seen, given Morocco's relative isolation in North Africa and its conflict with Algeria.

Morocco's economy has been spared the post-revolutionary turmoil of Tunisia and Egypt. At least, by regional comparison, the macro-economic data for the years 2011-2013 was quite positive. Nevertheless, youth unemployment still stands at over 17%, particularly rural areas face a high poverty rate and, according to IMF estimates, the informal sector amounts for up to 50% of Morocco's official GDP.[10] Morocco needs an annual economic growth rate of at least 6-7% in order to achieve a lasting effect on the labour market and thus bring the microeconomic realities of the population in accordance with the generally positive macroeconomic figures.

IV. Conclusion: Fragile stability and the role of the EU

A precarious stabilisation of the political situation can be observed in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. However, based on the described differences in the national backgrounds and contexts, the development prospects of the countries are very different. While Egypt witnesses a restitution of the old system coupled with the massive action against domestic critics, Tunisia seems to continue with its democratic experiment while successfully integrating stakeholders of the old regime into the new system. In Morocco, steered reforms and the monarchy's high degree of legitimacy have ensured political stability, at least for the time being.

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[6] Bertelsmann Transformation Index, *Morocco Country Report*, 2014.
[7] Kausch, *Morocco*, 2009; Khan and Mezran, *Morocco's Gradual Political and Economic Transition*, 2015, p. 2.
[8] Crétois and Boudarham, *Jihadists returning from Syria pose threat to Morocco*, 2014.
[9] Tadlaoui, *Morocco's religious diplomacy in Africa*, 2015.
[10] Khan and Mezran, *Morocco's Gradual Political and Economic Transition*, 2015, pp. 4-5.

Hence, in all three countries, representatives and interest groups of the old guards found a way to regain or retain their position in the political systems, either through the ballot box, skilful political manoeuvring and/or application of power.

The sustainability of the political power arrangements in the three countries is closely related to whether or not the respective governments manage to meet the socio-economic expectations of the population. Ultimately, it was the economic and social problems that caused citizens to rebel against their regimes. The political systems – be they new, reformed or restituted – will be judged on their economic performance. In addition to various home-made problems, such as endemic corruption, excessive bureaucracy, shortcomings in the education sector, urban-rural disparities, etc., this is complicated by the ongoing economic crisis in the European Union and the associated decline in demand on the European market.

In addition, the regional security environment is very likely to remain extremely fragile for the foreseeable future, negatively impacting on the security situation in the three countries. Weapons from the former Libyan army found their ways into numerous conflicts across the region. The so-called 'Islamic State' expands its alliances across Middle East and North Africa and gains ever-more followers. Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco have already been faced with numerous attacks in recent years.

Europe's ability to influence or even shape outcomes in the region is likely to remain limited. The combined crisis management capabilities on European and national levels proved insufficient in view of the military escalations in Libya and Syria, in addition to a lack of political will to get involved. On paper, the instruments of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) would have been well suitable to positively contribute to regional transformation efforts. In practice, however, the ENP lacked political rigour and consequently leverage, and the promises of mobility partnerships, monetary assistance and market access – the EU's famous 'three Ms' – were only very selectively fulfilled.[11]

The EU has just begun another round of debates and negotiations on how to revise its relationship with its Southern and Eastern neighbourhood. It envisages a differentiated strategy that takes into account regional and country-specific particularities and emphasises European interests vis-à-vis an unstable neighbourhood. At the end of the day, the EU's problem has not been a lack of political vision and ideas, but its incoherent policies. Hence, it is less a question of what is being planned on paper than of if and how this is translated into action. In any case, the positive expectations and the hope for a democratic transformation in North Africa and the Middle East that had accompanied the last revision of the ENP in 2011 have definitely changed for the worse.

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[11] Füle, *One year after the Arab spring*, 2012.

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