

Soldiers of Democracy: Military Legacies and Democratic Transitions in Egypt and Tunisia

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Abstract

After the Arab Spring, why did the Egyptian military overthrow its young democracy, while the Tunisian military supported its country's transition? More generally, what motivates some militaries to stage coups against nascent democracies? This book argues that the military's decision is shaped by its former autocrat's coup-proofing strategy. Militaries are more likely to thwart democratization when they had historically been coopted by their autocrats through a share of power or shared identity, and lose their privileged positions under democracy. By contrast, militaries should be more supportive of democratization when they had historically been marginalized, fragmented, and counterbalanced by their autocrats, and thereby gain from democracy. These military legacies from autocracy thus shape the likelihood of future democratic consolidation. This book illustrates the theory through case studies of Egypt and Tunisia, drawing upon over 100 interviews and three surveys of military personnel. It then probes the generalizability of the theory through a cross-national analysis of all democratic transitions between 1783-2016.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In early 2011, mass protests rocked the Arab world. In the Arab Spring, as the uprisings came to be known, millions of protesters mobilized across the region, rallying against decades of autocratic rule and demanding bread, freedom, and social justice. For weeks they gathered in central squares and roundabouts, protesting, chanting, singing, dancing, clashing with police, and finally, celebrating, as they toppled their dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. For a brief moment, it appeared that in the Arab world – the last bastion of solidly autocratic rule – democracy was about to take root.

Although Libya and Yemen soon descended into civil war, the more homogenous populations in Egypt and Tunisia were able to transition – at least initially – to democracy. Within a year of toppling their dictators, both countries held their first-ever free and fair elections, which were historic not only for their occurrence but also for their outcome. In both cases, long-repressed Islamist movements – the *Ennahdha* (Renaissance) movement in Tunisia and the *Ikhwan al-Muslimin* (Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt – claimed victory. In a symbolic reversal of fortune, democracy catapulted these Islamist movements out of the prisons and into the palaces.

But maintaining democracy was no easy task. With little experience in governance, and with actively hostile administrations held over from autocracy, the newly-elected governments in Egypt and Tunisia proved unable to satisfy the heightened expectations of their revolutions. Impatient populations quickly grew disillusioned with democracy, which had brought only economic recession, security threats, and political polarization. By the summer of 2013, only two years into democracy, the masses returned to the streets, now demanding the ouster of their democratically-elected governments and the revival of a strong leader to provide security and stability.

Here, the two stories diverge. In Egypt, the military, led by General Abdelfattah al-Sisi, seized the opportunity to overthrow the democratically-elected president Mohamed Morsi, ending Egypt's democratic experiment. In Tunisia, by contrast, the military refused to intervene, despite explicit calls for it to follow the lead of its Egyptian counterpart. The opposition in Tunisia, with nowhere left to turn, returned to negotiations with the democratically-elected government, putting the transition back on track.

Why did Egypt's transition to democracy fail, while Tunisia's has thus far succeeded? The central claim of this book is that the answer lies with each country's military. In Egypt, a military that had been tied to the former regime through a share of power and shared identity saw its position threatened by democracy, sparking a coup. In Tunisia, by contrast, a military that had historically been neglected, counterbalanced, and discriminated under autocracy saw its fortunes improve, wedding it to democracy. In short, how each military had been treated by its former autocrat shaped whether it would gain or lose power under democracy, and accordingly, whether it would support or abort its democratic transition.

In comparative perspective, Egypt and Tunisia's transitions were by no means unique. Empirically, transitions to democracy have about a 50-50 chance of success. Of 232 democratic transitions since the United States in 1783, roughly 52% have collapsed.¹ Moreover, of the 121 democratic breakdowns, the vast majority – 68% – ended like Egypt's: in a military coup. Although military coups are commonly portrayed as a developing world and Cold War phenomenon, in reality they have toppled democratic regimes in almost every region of the world and after all three waves of democratization (Huntington, 1991). Military coups were responsible for the majority of European democratic breakdowns after the first wave, including in France (1799), Spain (1923, 1936), Portugal (1926), Poland (1926), Greece (1909, 1935), Bulgaria (1923), and Lithuania (1926). Even in the post-Cold War era, 60 percent of democratic breakdowns have occurred at gunpoint, most recently in Honduras (2009), Guinea-Bissau (2012), Mali (2012), and Egypt (2013). Substantively, understanding why

¹Original data: see Chapter 5 for details.

some militaries choose to upend democratic transitions is critical to piecing together why some transitions succeed and others fail.

Despite being the leading cause of democratic collapse, the military has been relatively neglected in studies of democratic consolidation. A recent account laments that nearly 25 years after Stepan’s observation that “the military has probably been the least studied of the factors involved in new democratic movements” (1988, p. xi), “the situation has not changed drastically” (Barany, 2012, p. 2). While existing theories of democratization have highlighted factors that create an opportunity for the military to intervene, the military’s motivations for seizing these opportunities remain untested. This book attempts to fill this gap.

1 The Argument in Brief

The theory, presented in more detail in Chapter 2, begins with one of the most important decisions each dictator must make: how to prevent a military coup. Historically, the vast majority of dictators, 68% according to Svobik (2012), have lost power at the hands of their own militaries. To prevent this fate, dictators cannot simply abolish their militaries: most need them to guard against both external and internal threats. How dictators solve this dilemma – how they choose to ‘guard their guardians’ – is our point of departure.

Empirically, most dictators tend to “coup-proof” (Quinlivan, 1999) their militaries through one of two strategies: cooptation or counterbalancing. The former refers to securing the loyalty of the military through a share of power or a shared identity, removing any desire for a coup. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011), for instance, afforded his military veto power over national security decisions, regular appointments as ministers, governors, and ambassadors, a bloated budget and salaries, and control over large sectors of the economy. Mubarak also stacked the military with largely secular, anti-Islamist personnel. With its corporate interests satisfied, and with a mutual aversion to the Islamist opposition, the

Egyptian military had little interest in staging a coup against Mubarak.

While cooptation keeps the military satisfied, an alternative strategy – counterbalancing – entails making a coup more difficult. If potential coup-plotters believe they will face resistance from a more loyal faction, they may be deterred from staging a coup, or even defeated if they were to attempt one. The second strategy is thus to divide-and-rule the guardians: privileging a small unit or group within the military or building up a separate militarized apparatus such as a presidential guard. By privileging this counterbalancing force, dictators can afford to neglect the rest of the military, as any attempt at a coup will be resisted and defeated by this loyal, elite unit. Tunisia’s Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011), for instance, privileged his presidential guard, national guard, and a minority of military officers who hailed from coastal regions, relegating the majority of the military to a meager budget, outdated weapons, and little influence over policy. Both of these coup-proofing strategies – cooptation and counterbalancing – can help a dictator survive in power, but they produce two very different types of militaries: the former unified and politically powerful, the latter neglected and fragmented.

The seminal contribution of this book is to show how these two different coup-proofing strategies under autocracy subsequently shape the nature and outcome of democratization. When inheriting a powerful, coopted military, new democracies face incentives to rein in the military’s excess political and material power. On a normative level, a military that once enjoyed veto power over national security decisions and political appointments as ministers and governors should lose these privileges as elected civilians are empowered as decision-makers. Where coopted militaries were stacked with a particular class, ethnic, or ideological group, democratic norms push for more open recruitment. Moreover, electoral incentives should push elected governments to ‘trim the fat’ in the military’s bloated budget, redistributing the excess to their constituents. While strategically, new democracies know that moving too quickly against a powerful military may trigger a coup, balancing these competing incentives and finding the proper pace at which to curtail the military’s power is a decision fraught

with uncertainty and miscalculation. As a result, many new democracies inheriting coopted militaries make the fatal mistake of moving too quickly, sparking a coup.

When inheriting a counterbalanced military, by contrast, the path to democratization is much easier. Normative, electoral, and strategic incentives all align to increase the power of the counterbalanced military. In these cases, the threat to democracy emanates from the elite, counterbalancing forces, which had been privileged under autocracy. Strategically, new democracies have incentives to empower formerly counterbalanced militaries, ensuring they can defeat possible coup attempts from the counterbalancing forces. Normative and electoral incentives also push toward investing in the institution with the greater need, the neglected military. While this ‘rebalancing’ of the military relative to the elite, counterbalancing force may cause resentment among the latter, *it* will now be counterbalanced by a military gaining from, and thus wedded to, democracy. Any attempt at a coup by the formerly privileged counterbalancing force is likely to be resisted and defeated by these soldiers of democracy.

In short, this book argues that an autocrat’s choice of coup-proofing strategy – cooperation or counterbalancing – has important downstream consequences for whether future democratic transitions fall to military coups. These military legacies structure how democratic transitions unfold and shape the likelihood of democratic consolidation. Of course, new democracies still have agency to resist these structural incentives, occasionally succeeding in respecting the interests of a coopted military or failing to empower a counterbalanced one. However, the contribution of this book is to highlight an understudied structural factor – military legacies – that make democratic consolidation more or less likely.

2 Outline of the Book

This book consists of six chapters. The remainder of Chapter 1 surveys the existing literature on democratic consolidation, noting the relative absence of the military and highlighting the ways in which the book fills this gap. Chapter 2 lays out the theory, showing how military

legacies – in particular, cooptation and counterbalancing – differentially affect the likelihood of democratic consolidation.

Chapters 3 and 4 return to the cases with which we began, illustrating the theory through a comparative study of Egypt and Tunisia. While existing work argues that Tunisia’s transition succeeded due to its wealthier and more educated population, its more moderate Islamists, and the strength of its civil society, I show that these differences did not stop Tunisians from calling for democratic breakdown at a rate similar to Egyptians. Both countries in the summer of 2013 witnessed mass support for a military coup. The central difference between them was how their militaries responded to these calls. Their divergent responses, I argue, were shaped by the coup-proofing strategies pursued by their previous autocrats.

In making these claims, the book draws upon a wide range of original data. The first are 105 interviews conducted with senior civilian and military leaders prominent in each country’s democratic transition. In Tunisia, these included former President Moncef Marzouki, both Ennahdha prime ministers, and seven senior military generals. In Egypt, where most of the transitional government is now in prison, these culminated in a former minister, two former presidential advisors, and three former parliamentarians.

These interviews were then supplemented by three innovative surveys of military personnel in both Egypt and Tunisia. These are the first surveys of the military in the Middle East, and provide unique insights into how military officers and soldiers viewed the transitional period. The first of these surveys, conducted in fall 2016, consisted of 72 senior military officers from Tunisia’s retired officers association. The latter two, conducted online in summer 2018, consisted of 255 Tunisian and 1477 Egyptian military personnel, both retired and active-duty.

Based on these data, Chapter 3 shows how Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak had coopted the military, granting it considerable material and political power and stacking it with anti-Islamist forces. When Egypt attempted to transition to democracy in 2011, this coopted military saw its corporate interests and secular identity encroached upon by the democratically-elected

Muslim Brotherhood government, sparking a coup in 2013. The survey of military personnel confirms that these encroachments bred support for Morsi's ouster. Yet given the legacy of cooptation, that is what democratization entailed: interviews with exiled members of the Brotherhood reveal that they felt normative and electoral pressure to curtail the military's power and open its recruitment to all Egyptians.

Chapter 4 presents the case of Tunisia, the Arab Spring's one success story. In contrast to Mubarak in Egypt, Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali kept the military marginalized, internally fragmented, and counterbalanced by internal security forces. This neglected military then saw its fortunes reverse after the 2011 democratic transition. Democratically-elected governments empowered the military politically, materially, and institutionally, wedding it to democracy. Drawing on an original survey experiment of Tunisian military officers, I show that these improvements in the military's corporate interests over the course of Tunisia's transition had a causal effect on their support for democracy. The case studies of Egypt and Tunisia therefore show how the coup-proofing strategies pursued by previous autocrats structure whether the military will gain or lose from democratization.

Chapter 5 then probes whether the theory travels beyond Egypt and Tunisia through a cross-national analysis of all democratic transitions between 1783 and 2016, comprising all three waves of democratization. Drawing on an original coding of autocratic coup-proofing strategies, I find that previously coopted militaries are more likely than previously counterbalanced ones to stage coups against new democracies. To validate the mechanism, I show that over the course of a democratic transition, previously coopted militaries see a reduction in their material and political power prior to their coups, while previously counterbalanced ones see an enhancement in their power. Finally, the statistical analysis uncovers a powerful interaction effect between the military's will to thwart democracy and its opportunity to intervene. When both are present – for instance, an economic recession in a country with a formerly coopted military – democratic transitions are most likely to fail.

Finally, Chapter 6 concludes by revisiting the difficult cases of formerly coopted mili-

taries with an eye toward setting out the conditions under which democratization may still be possible and the strategies newly elected governments should pursue. The central claim is that the speed with which a democratic government should curtail the power of a previously coopted military depends on the level of domestic and international support for a coup. Where the military has become delegitimized as a political actor as a result of defeat in war or a poor record of governance, as in Argentina or Uruguay, the reduction of the military's power can occur more quickly. Similarly, where political parties have come to realize that knocking on the barracks does not help them gain power, as in Turkey today, elected governments have a freer hand in curtailing the military's power. Yet, the negotiated exit of a previously coopted military is still fraught with difficulty. As the case of Egypt demonstrates, miscalculations in the military's domestic and international support can lead to the collapse of a democratic transition, with grave consequences for all involved.

Do Egyptians Want Democracy? Both mainstream Islamists and their secular opponents generally agree that Egypt should be governed by a democratic political system, with a government chosen through free and fair elections. But unlike Tunisia, where a similar uprising against a dictatorship resulted in a coalition of Islamist and secular parties, Egyptian political parties could not find a middle ground, making politics a violent, zero-sum game. Once in power, the democratically-elected Morsi reacted to criticism and political protest often by emulating some of the repressive practices of the for Arab Militaries and Democratic Transition: A Comparative Study of the Tunisian, Egyptian and Syrian Cases. Militaries during Arab Political Transition: Egypt and Algeria. Arab Armies and the Revolutions of 2011: The Cases of Tunisia and Egypt. Libya: The Military and the Conundrum of Democratic Transition. The Military Establishment in the Face of Revolution: Comparing the Cases of Tunisia and Libya. The Military and Democratic Transition in Tunisia. On the Dynamics of Civilian-Military Relations in Tunisia: From Independence to Revolution. The Sudanese Army, the Janjaweed and Democratic Trans... Tunisia has not completed a democratic transition—far from it. It is easy to predict that the process will continue to be difficult, that mutual suspicion among parties and other political forces will remain high. But the most important groups recognize that they cannot eliminate the others: Ennahda, Nida Tounes as representative of the old political establishment, and the UGTT have recognized this in different ways. While a new upheaval cannot be excluded, it is unlikely that it would set Egypt on the path to a democratic transition, given the nature of the most important political actors. Many Egyptians claim that their country experienced not one but two revolutions, in January-February 2011 and in June-July 2013.