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**MASS-BASED UPRISINGS AND THE BREAKDOWN OF
AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES:
COMPARING TUNISIA AND EGYPT IN LIGHT OF ALGERIA'S
STABILITY**

PhD Thesis
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Abbreviations

AGEG	<i>Egyptian Anti-Globalization Group</i>
AIS	<i>Armée Islamique du Salut</i>
ANR	<i>Alliance Nationale Républicaine</i>
ASU	<i>Arab Socialist Union</i>
ATFD	<i>Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates</i>
BTP	<i>Banque Tunisienne de Solidarité</i>
CAWTAR	<i>Center for Arab Women Training and Research</i>
CNCD	<i>Coordination Nationale pour le Changement et la Démocratie</i>
CPG	<i>Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa</i>
CPR	<i>Congrès pour la République</i>
CSF	<i>Central Security Force</i>
CTUWS	<i>Center for Trade Union and Workers' Services</i>
ECES	<i>Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies</i>
ECESR	<i>Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights</i>
ECP	<i>Egyptian Communist Party</i>
EFITU	<i>Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions</i>
EPCSPI	<i>Egyptian Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada</i>
ERSAP	<i>Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Programme</i>
ETUF	<i>Egyptian Trade Union Federation</i>
FFS	<i>Front des Forces Socialistes</i>
FGF	<i>Future Generation Foundation</i>
FIS	<i>Front Islamique du Salut</i>
FLN	<i>Front de Libération Nationale</i>
FNS	<i>Fonds National de Solidarité</i>

GIA	<i>Groupe Islamique Armé</i>
GJM	<i>Global Justice Movement</i>
GPRA	<i>Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne</i>
GSPC	<i>Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat</i>
IAEA	<i>International Atomic Energy Agency</i>
IMF	<i>International Monetary Fund</i>
LADDH	<i>Ligue Algérienne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme</i>
LTDH	<i>Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme</i>
MB	<i>Muslim Brotherhood</i>
MDA	<i>Mouvement pour la Démocratie en Algérie</i>
MDS	<i>Mouvement des Démocrates Socialistes</i>
MDSO	<i>Mouvement Démocratique et Social</i>
MRI	<i>Mouvement de la Renaissance Islamique</i>
MRN	<i>Mouvement pour la Réforme Nationale</i>
MSP	<i>Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix</i>
MTI	<i>Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique</i>
MUP	<i>Mouvement de l'Unité Populaire</i>
NAC	<i>National Association for Change</i>
NDP	<i>National Democratic Party</i>
OPEC	<i>Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries</i>
PAGS	<i>Parti de l'Avant-Garde Socialiste</i>
PC	<i>Popular Committee</i>
PCOT	<i>Parti Communiste des Ouvrier Tunisien</i>
PCT	<i>Parti Communiste Tunisienne</i>
PDP	<i>Parti Démocratique Progressiste</i>
PRA	<i>Parti du Rénouveau Algérien</i>
PSC	<i>Peasant Solidarity Committee</i>

PSD	<i>Parti Socialiste Destourien</i>
PSL	<i>Parti Social-Libéral</i>
PT	<i>Parti des Travailleurs</i>
PUP	<i>Parti d'Unité Populaire</i>
RCC	<i>Revolutionary Command Council</i>
RCD	<i>Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique</i>
RETAU	<i>Real Estate Tax Authorities Union</i>
RND	<i>Rassemblement Nationale Démocratique</i>
RS	<i>Revolutionary Socialists</i>
RSP	<i>Rassemblement Socialiste Progressive</i>
SCAF	<i>Supreme Council of the Armed Forces</i>
SLP	<i>Socialist Labour Party</i>
SONATRACH	<i>Société Nationale pour la Recherche, la Production, le Transport, la Transformation, et la Commercialisation des Hydrocarbures</i>
SRC	<i>Socialist Renewal Current</i>
SSIS	<i>State Security Investigations Sector</i>
UDC	<i>Union des Diplômés Chômeurs</i>
UDU	<i>Union Démocratique Unioniste</i>
UGTA	<i>Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens</i>
UGTT	<i>Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail</i>
UNTT	<i>Union National des Travailleurs Tunisiens</i>
UTICA	<i>Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat</i>
WB	<i>World Bank</i>
WSF	<i>World Social Forum</i>
WTO	<i>World Trade Organization</i>

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Writing a PhD thesis is a contradictory task. It is largely carried out in isolation, but brings many debts and rewards to other people. This ‘classic’ paradox for any academic scholar is possibly even more strident for those in the qualitative field, where books and peer-reviewed articles take the place of interviews and statistical data collections. Yet, in actuality, many people have lent a hand, helping me to do a better job than I would actually have done alone. Although there is the concrete risk of not acknowledging some of those scholars, teachers, and also friends who directly and indirectly have provided a valuable contribution to the development of this thesis, I will try to mention all of them in these few lines.

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Introduction

A famous scholar – and actually much more than ‘just’ a scholar – once stated that “philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it”. Then, in an apparently contradictory move, he spent an unbelievable amount of time in the library of the British Museum, seeking to decrypt the way in which capitalism works. He neither conducted interviews with businessmen nor ran linear regressions. After 150 years, despite these tremendous drawbacks – at least according to current mainstream social scientists – Karl Marx’s analysis remains one of the finest examinations of the structural components of the most famous mode of production. He was successful in his work, I think, because he started from the premise that the actual unfolding of phenomena is hidden behind a distorted and epiphenomenal surface, which is immediately and, to some extent, erroneously captured by our eyes. It is scholars’ task to scratch this gelatinous patina and to fully grasp social reality and its developments. After all, if symptoms and underlying causes – to put it in medical terms – would be the same thing, there would be no need for doctors. In a rather similar vein, it can be argued that science exists because phenomena are not what they seem to be at a first glance. It is therefore in this contradictory tension between appearance and reality that the soul of doing research has to be found, implicitly asking scholars to be as critical as possible.

When, some years ago, I moved away from a positivistic interpretation of reality, this research project started taking shape. In sharp contrast to what would have been reasonable to think when I began my doctorate, this study has not been a deeper and larger investigation of what I had analysed in my master’s thesis. Just as urban people plan to live in the countryside for decades and then eventually end up in noisy metropolitan suburbs, I had been initially engaged in voting behaviour analysis and then wrote a thesis on the breakdown of authoritarian regimes. People – and scholars in particular – love representing their individual choices as a linear and logic chain of events. For them, life is simply animated by ‘increasing returns’, in which breaking points and critical junctures simply do not exist. I suspect that this farcical representation does not fit well with our own daily experience and – for sure – it did not in my case. The intellectually smooth and comfortable environment in which I used to live was literally smashed by the dramatic social and political events that affected nearly the whole Middle East and North Africa in 2010–2011. The mass-based protests that broke out there, the downfall of four long-lasting authoritarian regimes, and the struggle between

revolutionary forces and dominant elites showed me that the fall of the Berlin Wall did not mean, as too often I had previously imagined, that politics in the twenty-first century would be a restricted elitist game played out almost exclusively in parliamentary chambers or television studios. I learned that, although masses in general just observe politics sitting on the fence, when they enter into the political arena, it is likely that previously institutionalized procedures will be suddenly destabilized.

As is often the case, however, researches and books are not only the product of the authors' scientific and aseptic interest towards a specific phenomenon, but are also intimately linked to their feelings and concerns. In this regard, this thesis is not an exception at all. In the late 2000s, my own political engagement was on the rise, despite a quite low political temperature on European university campuses and in European society. My gradual, even if never really militant, involvement into politics certainly played a role in stimulating my curiosity towards the radical movements that were fighting to achieve – at a time in which social exclusion and economic polarization were increasing in the whole of Western Europe – a less unequal and more democratic world.

When I started being involved in studying the Arab uprisings, there was not any specific social-scientific theory that directly guided my analysis. Besides, thanks to the fact that I had not been previously engaged with the region, I was not forced – as many senior scholars were – to justify, reshape, and reformulate in new terms old arguments. The initial disadvantage of researching a region I did not properly know, provided me with a tremendous amount of leeway when my intellectual virginity was matched by a sufficiently good level of knowledge. However, the more I surveyed the literature on the popular uprisings that hit the Middle East and North Africa, the more I found myself uncomfortable with it. The bulk of these studies were driven by the attempt to apply general theoretical frameworks to these processes, often ending up in inadequate accounts of what happened. Insights developed by the democratization literature became obsessively present in academic works, implicitly predicting the establishment of liberal democratic regimes throughout the region and representing protests as a clash between despotic, cruel, and outdated regimes, on the one hand, and educated, liberal-oriented, and peaceful demonstrators, on the other. Since this hyper-stereotyped stream of research could not present the defeat of authoritarian regimes as the product of pacts between soft-liners in the government's ranks and moderate elements in the opposition forces, it focused on 'new' social actors – the youth – and modern technological means – the internet and social media. The results obtained were mediocre and

sharply criticized by the much smaller Marxist school, which, however, reading the whole process as a ‘mere’ clash between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, did not offer much more insightful explanations of the complex social and political process at stake, finding itself frustrated when counter-revolutionary forces emerged as dominant again.

The inability of both the democratization literature and studies on revolution to give an account of the events persuaded me that the Arab uprisings have to be understood through a new theoretical lens. Working specifically on the Tunisian and Egyptian dynamics, it immediately became clear to me that the breakdown of the authoritarian regimes in these two countries was in no way the product of an initial split – as the elite-based literature on democratization would have predicted – in the regime’s ranks. On the contrary, a long-lasting process of accumulation of social and anti-regime energies developed over the course of (at least) a decade, eventually and spectacularly blowing up in mass-based uprisings. It was the sudden entrance of the masses into the political arena that triggered unprecedented systemic crises and the subsequent sharp increase in the role of state actors, which were ‘forced’ to pursue partially autonomous roles to defend their own specific interests and the system as a whole. The pressure from below was so strong that the dominant coalition did not split as an effect of the mass mobilization. It simply melted down.¹ Up to this point, it might be argued, there is simply nothing that has not been stated by studies on revolution. Moreover, the role played by the masses seems to largely vindicate Leon Trotsky’s interpretation of the way in which a revolutionary situation unfolds. Nevertheless, no social revolution developed throughout the Middle East. This was the effect of the lack of organized revolutionary forces as well as the product of the non-disintegration of state apparatuses in the uprising or in its immediate aftermath. It can be also stated that the revolutionary fervour was so low that even the emergence of an actual phase of dual power was avoided by the old and new elites in Egypt and Tunisia. It might sound paradoxical, but multiple sovereignty arose in unsuccessful uprisings, such as Syria, in derailed transitions, such as Libya, and in those contexts in which mass-based protests led to ephemeral and inconsistent changes, such as Yemen. These developments were both the cause and the effect of the partial or total collapse of the state in these three countries.

The combination of all these elements convinced me that the Arab uprisings could not be treated as negative cases of failed democratization (despite Tunisia) or missing revolutions.

¹ This does not mean, however, that all sectors of the previous ruling bloc were physically annihilated. In the immediate aftermaths of Ben Ali and Mubarak’s fall, some regime apparatchiks re-emerged as relevant social and political actors, playing a crucial role in the transition period.

They were qualitatively different processes, due to the fact that their soul had to be found in the specific way in which the fall of the authoritarian regimes took place. Besides, my own interest matched well with a general scholarly trend characterized by new attention being paid to authoritarian regimes, which in spite of the widely spread optimistic views after the dismantling of the Eastern bloc, continued to be part of the political environment, remaining overwhelming dominant in some world regions – first and foremost, the Middle East and Eurasia. As sadly underlined by Freedom House’s 2016 Report on *Freedom in the World*, for ten years in a row, freedom in the world has declined. Moreover, 2016 was the worst year of the last decade, with 72 countries showing a net decline in freedom and just 43 having made gains.

This thesis focuses, therefore, on the breakdown of authoritarian regimes, developing an original account of the way in which non-democratic regimes can be defeated by mass-based uprisings. Having said that, the interest in dealing with the Egyptian and Tunisian cases is obvious and largely dictated by the attempt to analyse the phenomenon under scrutiny. In many respects, this could have been enough. In spite of Dante Alighieri’s predilection for the number three, we should not forget that there is nothing magic about numbers as such. However, unlike many other inductive studies, which have been limited only to ‘positive’ cases, it seemed to me important to broaden the scope of the analysis, showing that the absence of some key structural elements might become an insurmountable hindrance to the unfolding of a process of authoritarian breakdown under the pressure of the masses. For several reasons that will become clear in the next chapters, I decided to concentrate on another North African country – that is, Algeria. This apparently logical and linear way of thinking, based on the idea that a counter-case could have strengthened considerably my theoretical argument, was actually much more tumultuous in reality and, as often happens in the process of selecting cases, intellectual motivations were strictly interwoven with personal ones. For some mysterious and complex reasons, I was deeply fascinated by the authoritarian stability of Algeria, finding immediately disappointing the recurrent explanations that circulated about the former French colony’s stability during the Arab uprisings.² Therefore, whilst many scholars moved to explain the non-success of the protest movement in Algeria after having given an account of some ‘positive’ cases in the region, my effort followed a much more hybrid path in which I moved back and forth among different countries, finding a coherent orderliness only at a quite late stage in the writing of the thesis.

² My attempt to provide a synthetic, but reasoned, explanation of the Algerian regime’s ability to ‘weather the storm’ has been recently published in the on-line version of *Democratization* (Del Panta 2017).

This study does not claim to be original on account of having analysed social and political events that were largely overlooked by other scholars. On the contrary, it sheds new light on deeply studied events, reading the whole process through a new theoretical lens. The existence of a large literature on the subject of analysis is often seen as problematic, due to the fact that such a situation, it is argued, eliminates the possibility to make what is supposed to be a unique contribution. This view, however, does not rest on any serious scientific basis, being largely the product of a scholarly bias towards new and first-hand data. In the last decades, this has led to a boom in quantitative studies conducted through the tools provided by statistical analysis, which has largely become the general standard of doing research in the social sciences. There is no intention here to throw the baby out with the bathwater. That is, the progress made in some sub-fields of political science thanks to the use, for instance, of linear and multivariate regression is beyond doubt. Yet, it is one thing to see statistical analysis as *a* tool, it is something else to believe that it is *the* tool. This often implicit intellectual slip has forced scholars who work in the qualitative field of research into a difficult situation, which in general has been tackled by them relying on other sources of new data other than numbers. Conducting interviews has therefore become the indispensable element for young scholars who proudly claim to do qualitative research. Again, there is nothing wrong with conducting interviews as such. Nevertheless, scholars should at least take the time to think about the positive and negative consequences of this technique rather than to start going around the world with notebooks or recording devices in their hands. As is often the case, risks tend to be higher when temptation is at its highest – meaning in this case during street protests, demonstrations, uprisings, and revolutionary crises. In such situations, whilst conducting interviews can provide leverage and also some sort of academic pedigree, which can be redundantly put forward in front of those who just sit in the library for years, tremendous risks are present too. Not only the purposes of the people protesting in the streets are incredibly varied and contradictory, but also the unintended consequences of their actions are much more relevant than their conscious intentions. It does not matter whether the majority of protesters in Tahrir square had liberal, socialist, or Islamist views. No interview with them could ever say something about the breakdown of Mubarak's regime and the subsequent events. Explaining these outcomes, in which forces much greater than the protesters are operating, is precisely the task of academic scholars, who have to rely on their own work rather than on the 'quotes' of activists and militants.

The aforementioned general trends were worsened by the isolation in which Middle Eastern specialists have constantly found themselves. Indeed, the region has been either completely

overlooked in global comparative studies or explained through the lens of the ‘exception’. Among others, colonial domination, late state formation, fettered development, oil rents, and Islam have become the recurrent arguments used to explain the exceptional character of the Middle East. The reaction of regional experts to these scholarly trends has been largely defensive, implicitly accepting, rather than challenging, the supposed exceptional character of the geographical area analysed. This has produced – with the partial and remarkable exception of the American school – studies that have been based on single countries with a strong historical perspective that from time to time has assumed nearly anthropologist and ethnocentric traits. It is not rare, for instance, to find in the Middle East scholars who are country, more than regional, experts, reproducing through their failure to provide generalizable knowledge the same logic of exceptionality that they would like to challenge. By reacting to these global and regional intellectual developments, which are regarded as problematic here, this thesis proposes a study of three countries – Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia – through the tools provided by Comparative Historical Analysis (CHA). CHA entails a macro-configurational, case-based, and temporally oriented research, animated by the tools provided by process-tracing. Specifically, on account of the fact that this thesis does not use specific causal claims that were initially formulated by other and previous studies, it adopts an inductive process tracing in which the complex sequence that eventually leads to the outcome is gradually identified by moving back and forth between theory and cases. As expected, therefore, this study is entirely based on secondary sources, taking full advantage of the extraordinary rich literature dedicated to the Arab uprisings. Arguably, after the downfall of the Soviet Union no other social and political events have received greater international attention, also becoming the first uprising in human history to be nearly entirely recorded and filmed thanks to the new technologies. In sharp contrast to what is in general assumed, this was a happy circumstance for me, due to the fact that my task was not to provide new data but – as should be the case for comparativist scholars – to systematically take into consideration both specific accounts of the three countries under examination and theoretical writings that have dealt with the political phenomenon of interest. In this regard, the fact that the most complicated case to analyse was Algeria should not sound surprising, given the much more limited attention that it attracts. In short, this work cannot be blamed for the lack of primary data, a task that was already and extraordinarily carried out by other scholars. Had I re-done the primary research, I would have provided no further information, ending up writing a redundant and superfluous study. In contrast, this thesis was voluntarily conducted in the silent and cosy ‘ivory tower’, doing fieldwork in the library. Even during my stay at the

American University in Cairo, this attitude was not abandoned in any way. I was never seriously attracted by the idea of interviewing some of the ‘revolutionary zombies’ who passed their nights chatting at the *El Horreya*, between socialist activists and police spies.

In this regard, this thesis has to be judged on the challenging task of summarizing the huge literature that has been taken into consideration, the attempt to extrapolate from specific and country-based accounts the general and recurrent aspects, and the overall theoretical argument proposed. It is not my place to say whether a coherent comparative historical study has been developed through the thesis. Similarly, I cannot evaluate the scholarly appropriateness of my subject of analysis. As usual, I will be judged by readers. I can simply hope that my contribution will be of some value in the attempt to reach a more profound understanding of the way in which authoritarian regimes break down – something that remains, after all, the first and crucial step towards a freer society.

PART I: PERSPECTIVES

Chapter 1:
FRAMING MASS-BASED UPRISINGS IN THE ARAB WORLD

1. Some introductory lines

The breakdown of authoritarian regimes is not only the product of elite negotiations or the result of political liberalization initiated by the ruling coalition at a time when collective protests have already delegitimized the dominant coalition. Authoritarian regimes can also break down without pacts and compromises. Although this is certainly a less frequent path, autocracies are also defeated by mass-based uprisings in which the emergence of a nationwide cross-class and cross-ideological coalition brings about a regime change. These are rare and cathartic events, characterized by the sudden eruption of the masses into the political arena. As a direct consequence of this, the previous daily life is smashed and a large spectrum of emotions – from hope to fear – inspires unusual human behaviour, making possible what was simply unthinkable just a short while before. Moreover, whilst political communities are in general governed by self-reproduction and slow incremental change in the institutional setting, these often long-lasting phases of continuity may be interrupted by explosive moments in which the previous protracted and molecular accumulation of anti-systemic energies becomes spectacularly visible. During these events, the extraordinary social forces activated determine that not only quantitative and mere incremental developments are feasible, but also that radical and qualitative shifts can be achieved. Seen in this light, one might expect there to be library shelves filled with thousands of books and articles that deal with the dismantling of authoritarian rule under the pressure of the masses. On the contrary, and quite surprisingly, this topic has been scarcely studied as an interesting phenomenon in itself by political scientists and sociologists, who have preferred either analysing it as ‘the closest cousin’ of social revolutions or simply clustering it in large-*n* statistical studies of regime change. There are several reasons for this, but one is of paramount importance: the contradictory nature of a process that falls somewhere in between the ‘generic’ dismantling of authoritarian rule and the ‘great’ social revolutions. Exactly because this thesis wants to distance itself from these two extremes, our Scylla and Charybdis have to be defined carefully. Before dealing with this challenging task, however, it seems worthwhile to spend some words framing the social and political events under study here – that is, the so-called Arab uprisings. Highlighting the general picture should make it easier for readers to understand why both the existing democratization literature and studies on revolution have largely failed to provide an insightful theoretical framework to analyse the events that shook the Arab world.

2. The Arab uprisings

The wave of protests that spread from Tunisia to (nearly) the whole Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2010–2011 has brought about a profound reshaping of the terrain of regional politics. The general outlines of the story are certainly familiar to many, but it seems appropriate to briefly sketch the broad picture. After the tragic Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation on 17 December 2010, Tunisia was rocked by vast and geographically diffused social protests, which eventually forced the Tunisian president, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, to flee the country. Less than a month later, a similar scenario unfolded in Egypt and this time it was President Hosni Mubarak who was removed from office. By the end of February, virtually every country in the region had been hit by huge and militant demonstrations. In the following months, two other autocrats – Muammar Qaddafi in Libya and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen – were defeated, whereas political and economic concessions were made by many regimes menaced by real or simply announced protests. The trajectories of the various countries were as heterogeneous as possible. The bulk of them weathered the storm through ephemeral changes and business as usual was again the only game in town. Six regimes, by contrast, were rocked by widespread protests that seriously challenged the survival of the existing order. In Bahrain the Saudi-led military intervention tilted the balance of forces in favour of the al-Khalifa dynasty, who began a systematic purge of the regime's opponents; whilst the armed confrontation between the regime and protesters in Syria caused the country to descend into a never-ending and cruel civil war whose conclusion remains uncertain to this day. The Libyan puzzle, in which Qaddafi's loyalists seemed to be taking the upper hand, was resolved by NATO's intervention, which brought about the fall of the regime and Qaddafi's death. Yet, the ensuing consequence was civil war. In Yemen, Saleh's removal led to an even worse scenario in which the failure of a political power-sharing bargain gave rise to the Houthi insurgency. They were able to conquer large parts of the country, including the capital, Sana'a, before being pushed partially back by the war unleashed by Saudi Arabia and a vast international coalition. With respect to Yemen too, the final outcome is unpredictable. Seen in this light, it is undeniable that the political opening experienced in Tunisia and Egypt was unmatched. However, whilst the former country has moved towards a form of regime that it is fair to say a liberal democracy, in the latter the military coup led by the ministry of defence, Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, has led to the establishment of a new and more severe form of authoritarianism.

These largely gloomy trajectories – at least, in the light of the now famous slogan shouted in the Arab streets, *bread, freedom, social justice* – should not lead us to conclude that nothing has happened. Whilst the Arab region has historically been dotted with protests, revolts, tumults, uprisings, and military coups – some of these also revolutionary in flavour – never before have popular protests brought down authoritarian regimes as happened in Tunisia and Egypt in 2010–2011.³ Seen in this light, they are unique and extraordinary events that merit being analysed in depth. Therefore, the central questions that this thesis will try to answer are: What were the causes of the downfall of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt? What sets of economic, political, and social factors were at work? Moreover, why did not Algeria, which shares ‘sufficient similarities’ with these two countries, follow the same path? This comparison and contrast will also allow light to be shed on one of the greatest puzzles of the Arab uprisings: Why the Tunisian and Egyptian examples were not replicated? Is this simply related to an “authoritarian learning” process through which later hit regimes absorbed the lessons to be learned (Heydemann and Leenders 2011; 2014)? Or were structural aspects and the configuration of the opposition movement relevant too? All the questions raised here are classic first-order questions – that is, questions that at the same time draw students to study social life and that are continuously raised anew in the mind of the proverbial man in the street (Rule quoted in Mahoney 2003: 131–132). However, this chapter does not provide the basis for the answers. Rather, it explores the current state of the field, proposes a general definition of the breakdown of an authoritarian regime, and explains the theoretical tools used.

Before moving on, however, a couple of lexical remarks are needed. Throughout the thesis the wave of protests that engulfed the MENA region in 2010–2011 is synthesized in the expression ‘Arab uprisings’. Although this is not without shortcomings – after all, in the region there are not only Arab countries, and also within these countries there are not only Arab people – it is patently better than the commonly used, especially in the early phases after the outburst of the protests, ‘Arab spring’ or ‘Arab awakening’. Not only was the former expression not new, since it had been used to describe the democratic domino effect that was expected after the 2005 Iraqi elections, but it also expresses a positivist attitude about the ‘right’ direction towards which the whole world should tend – that is, individual freedoms and

³ Actually, as underlined by Willow Berridge (2015), two military regimes in Sudan were overthrown by mass-based uprisings characterized by the establishment of cross-class and cross-ideological coalitions as early as 1964 and 1985. I wish to thank Berridge for discussing at length these two (unknown to me) events during the annual conference of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies in 2016, when we presented our papers in the same panel.

a free market economy. ‘Arab awakening’ is arguably even more offensive, suggesting that the Arab populations were asleep for a long time. Only those who discovered Midan Tahrir on January 25, 2011, or imagine history as something animated by events rather than processes, can share a similar view. Likewise, in consideration of what was stated before, the use of the term revolution without adjectives has been avoided as much as possible. It is true that it might be too soon to judge. After all, the French revolution lasted more than ten years. Yet, it seems that the revolutionary potential accumulated in the previous years has largely gone. This does not mean that strikes, protests, and even uprisings are unlikely in the next few years. Since none of the long-lasting social grievances have been resolved, the neo-liberal posture has not been removed in any way, and the institutionalization of the regimes remains weak, such developments cannot be ruled out (Hanieh 2015). Moreover, as recently stated by Roll (2016: 38), whilst Egypt’s armed forces have been the real winner from the country’s political turmoil, “the parasitic military’s state within the state makes Egypt’s political-economic order unsustainable in the long run”. Nevertheless, one also to be reminded that many of the conditions – for instance, a favourable opposition environment to the collaboration among different political traditions as well as the presence of long-lasting autocracies with a narrow and decreasing support basis – that led to the outburst of protests in 2010–2011 are simply missing nowadays. As far as this thesis is concerned, that political cycle of contestation should therefore be regarded as closed. From time to time, rather than ‘Arab uprisings’, ‘Arab upheavals’ is used in the text. This is simply to make more fluid and less arduous the reading.

3. The regime change literature: Does it fit well with the Tunisian and Egyptian events?

In one of his most famous book chapters, Przeworski (1986: 50) points out the four kinds of factors that are often mentioned in the literature to explain divisions in authoritarian regimes and the (sometimes) subsequent process of liberalization. After having ignored the functionalist explanation and ruling out the possibility to “unambivalently assess” the effects of foreign pressure, Przeworski criticises the view that legitimacy is a necessary condition of regime survival, underlining that the crucial aspect, on the contrary, is the presence or absence of any viable and supposedly preferable alternative. In the end, therefore, he just focuses on the last and remaining explanation – that is, conflicts within the ruling bloc. In Przeworski’s (*Ibid*: 56) own words:

A regime begins to crack if some members of the ruling bloc go outside for support. If the regime itself is cohesive or tightly controlled, then a compromise solution cannot emerge. Consequently most dictatorial regimes we have known fell only on the battlefield, in an external or civil war. Popular unrest in the face of a cohesive power bloc places the resolution of political conflicts in the relations of physical force.

Had Przeworski been right in his assessment, Ben Ali and Mubarak would have survived the 2010–2011 mass-based protest movements. After all, not only were there neither conflicts nor rifts in the ruling coalitions before the outbreak of the uprisings, but it is also hard to believe that a much more uneven relation of force might ever exist than that between, for instance, the Egyptian military and the unarmed protesters gathered in Tahrir square.

Although criticizing Przeworski might be correct, it has to be kept in mind that his views were not personal certainties, but the concluding points of a much broader intellectual and editorial project led by O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead (1986). These three scholars, relying on some previous and influential studies (in particular, Rustow 1970; Linz and Stepan 1978) and working on democratization in Southern Europe and Latin America, established the 'founding principles' of what became known as the transitology perspective. According to this stream of research, actors' strategies and choices during the transition process itself are crucial, being capable of overriding unfavourable structural conditions. The focus here is therefore on the short-term political calculations of actors and on the emergence of situations of great uncertainty in which political players – to put it in game theory terms – are unable to understand their own negotiating positions. Democracy, in the transitology perspective, is not the product of actors' frank commitment to achieving pluralistic electoral competition and civil liberties, but the consequence of the relative balance of power between supporters and opponents of the authoritarian regime. This uncertain situation leads both sides to not pursue a risky zero-sum game, preferring negotiating power-sharing arrangements and mutual guarantees inspired by what Przeworski (1991: 87) calls a 'maximin strategy' – that is, to pursue changes that will ensure the best conditions for the weakest party, due to the fact that none is certain whether its own position is actually the weakest one. As already underlined years before by Rustow (1970: 357), democracy emerges as a second-best solution, whilst the little or no role played by ideas and beliefs in its achievement has been summarized in the famous notion of 'democracy without democrats' (Salamé 1994). The contingency-oriented and anti-fatalistic perspective adopted by the transitology literature has brought about a profound reshaping of the role played by macrostructural factors, social classes, and

mobilizations from below in the process of regime change. In O'Donnell and Schmitter's (1986: 20, 28) own words:

We assert that there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence – direct or indirect – of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself, principally along the fluctuating cleavage between hard-liners and soft-liners. [...] The 'opening', 'thaw', 'decompression', or whatever is called, of authoritarian rule, usually produces a sharp and rapid increase in general politicization and popular activation – 'the resurrection of civil society' as O'Donnell has described it.⁴

The transitology perspective has produced an indisputable breakthrough in democratization studies, which up to its emergence had been dominated by the modernization theory and by the classic social forces tradition. Both these two approaches have seen democratization as "endogenous to specific sets of social conditions such as levels of economic development or of economic inequality, which engender class alliances and distinct paths of political development favouring or not favouring a democratic outcome" (Ahmed and Capoccia 2014: 4). It might sound contradictory for a thesis that deals in depth with macrostructural factors, class analysis, and mass-based mobilizations – aspects that will become much clearer in the next chapter – but these two theoretical traditions are of limited, if any, importance for the purpose of this study. The reason lies in the great amount of attention paid by them to the final outcome – often liberal democracy – and the consequent misspecification of the process of breakdown of the previously existing regime. For instance, in his founding article on what would become known as modernization theory, Seymour Lipset (1959: 75) starts from the premise that there is a positive, although mediated, relationship between socio-economic development and the establishment of liberal democracy, concluding that "the more well-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy". He never, however, regards the smashing of authoritarian domination as a first and crucial step towards the emergence of democratic rule. In a quite similar vein, in *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966), the new starting point of the sociological perspective founded by Karl Marx and Max Weber many decades earlier and then largely ignored in academic studies, Moore analyses why different countries have followed different paths to modernization. In particular, he is interested in explaining why Great Britain, the United States, and France were able to combine capitalism and liberal democracy, whereas capitalism in Germany and Japan was

⁴ As already underlined with regard to Przeworski's long quotation, this argument does not fit at all with the Arab uprisings.

mixed together with fascism. Besides, the non-development of capitalism ‘forced’ Russia and China to pursue a communist path to modernization. Again, the dismantling of the authoritarian regimes is of little or no relevance for the author. Similarly, the quite recent revival experienced by both modernization theory (Przeworski and Limongi 1997; Przeworski *et al.* 2000) and the social forces tradition (Luebbert 1991; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992) has not altered in any way this picture.⁵

As far as this thesis is concerned, there are two main aspects of the transitology literature that merits to be taken seriously into consideration. As underlined by Møller and Skaaning (2013: 129), O’Donnell and Schmitter’s (1986) book “was *not* entitled *Transitions to Democracy* but *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*”. This was partially an attempt to incorporate in the title the uncertain character of transitions from authoritarian regimes, which can end up in political democracy as well as in new and more severe forms of authoritarian rule, or simply in the non-institutionalization of a new order. Even more, however, this has to be considered as the direct consequence of the intellectual perspective that the factors and forces that determine the breakdown of an authoritarian regime might not be the same that favour the establishment of democratic institutions. As assessed by Grilli di Cortona (2016: 49), in one of his last works before prematurely passing away, “the factors that lead to democratization [are not always] the same that cause the crisis of the old regime”. To some extent, however, it seems that the transitology literature has not drawn the logical and potentially fecund consequences of this brilliant insight. On the contrary, it has been the Italian school that has produced the most interesting developments. This brings us to the second important element. Working explicitly on some of Morlino’s (1980; 2003) previous studies, Grilli di Cortona (2009: 45) has identified four phases of democratization: *a*) crisis and breakdown of the non-democratic regime; *b*) transition; *c*) installation; and *d*) deepening. As should be sufficiently clear at this point, this thesis deals with the first period, which arguably is the most neglected in regime change studies, whilst it has no interest at all in analysing the other three phases.

Beyond assessing the strengths of the transitology literature, it is no less crucial to highlight its limits and its inability to deal with the 2010–2011 uprisings in the Arab world. Actually, some of the drawbacks in this literature had already been pointed out by several scholars in the 1990s and early 2000s. First, the transitology school has been accused of

⁵ Przeworski and Limongi (1997) have shown that once democracy has been established, for whatever reason, it survives in countries above a certain level of economic development. The authors have interpreted this finding as a direct challenge to the modernization theory established by Lipset. However, this thesis agrees with Geddes’ (1999: 117) perspective – that is, Przeworski and Limongi’s study is “a revisionist confirmation – in fact, the strongest empirical confirmation ever” of Lipset’s work.

overgeneralization – that is, transforming a historical and geographically bounded phenomenon into the general standard through which democracy unfolds. Barbara Geddes (1999a: 140) finds “little evidence in a set of 163 regimes transitions [...] for the claim that pacts increase the likelihood of democracy”, whilst after having analysed the transitions of Eastern European countries McFaul (2002: 243) concludes that “in the long stretch of history, the success transitions from communism to democracy may look more like the norm, while the pacted transitions and transitions from above in Latin America and Southern Europe may look more like the aberration”.⁶ Secondly, the elite-centric perspective of transitology has been criticized for failing to take adequately into account collective actors, especially labour-union mobilizations (Collier and Mahoney 1997; Collier 1999). In particular, this stream of research has focused on re-evaluating the role played by mobilizations from below in those cases regarded as paradigmatic by the transitology literature, dedicating a great deal of attention to Spain (Collier and Mahoney 1997; Bermeo 1997; and much more recently Baby 2012). Thirdly and finally, drawing on their distinction between totalitarian, post-totalitarian, authoritarian, and sultanistic regimes, Linz and Stepan (1996) implicitly criticise transitology for having overlooked the relevance of the specific regime that is replaced, opening the way to Geddes’ (1999b) reflections on the different ways in which single-party, personalistic, and military regimes break down.⁷

The attempt to answer (in advance) such criticisms and the awareness of the existence of several and different paths to democracy has shaped the development of a stimulating literature, often led by some of the most prominent scholars of transitology (Karl 1990; Karl and Schmitter 1991; Munck and Leff 1997). In her seminal article, for instance, Karl (1990: 8) states that “it is important to start to distinguish between possible modes of transition to democracy”. Consequently, Karl focuses on the specific combination of agents (elites or masses) and strategies (compromise or force). The cross-tabulation of these elements produce four ideal types of democratic transitions, partially re-elaborated and applied far beyond Latin America in a subsequent article by Karl and Schmitter (1991).⁸

⁶ See Morlino (2012: 11-12) for a detailed discussion of these aspects.

⁷ Some of these elements are further discussed in the next paragraphs.

⁸ Although Munck and Leff (1997) claim to have introduced a new and better typology to understand how countries become democratic, their article is largely inspired by the same logic as adopted by Karl (1990) and Karl and Schmitter (1991). Moreover, Munck and Leff’s attempt to substitute the dichotomy between the elite and the masses with the distinction between the incumbent elite and the counter-elite, as well as the introduction of some combination of the two seem simply detrimental in explanatory terms. For these reasons, Munck and Leff’s (1997) article is not analysed in depth here.

		Strategy	
		Compromise	Coercion
Agents	Elites	Pact	Imposition
	Masses	Reform	Revolution

Fig. 1: Karl and Schmitter's (1991) transition typology

As long as we are dealing with a transition that is predominantly the consequence of elite actors searching a compromise, there is a *pact*; whilst when the compromise is the product of the mobilization of the masses from below without the use of violence, we are witnessing a *reform*. The third type of transition is instead *imposition* – that is, a regime change imposed by the elites from above. Clearly, none of these three paths fit well with the Arab uprisings. We have therefore to turn our attention to the fourth and final type. Leaving aside the extraordinary conceptual stretching introduced through the use of the word *revolution*, it is possible to find here some of those elements that were crucial in the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings – that is, the mobilization of the masses and the resistance offered by the ruling elite. Nevertheless, as made clear by the example proposed by Karl and Schmitter (1991: 275), i.e. Madagascar, the two authors have in mind a situation in which the masses mobilised in the streets ‘merely’ force a particular reluctant autocrat to start working on a new democratic setting. However, more than a different path, this should be seen as a radical variant of *reform*. In conclusion, the democratization literature does not provide any particularly illuminating theoretical framework to study the uprisings in the Arab world. Modernization theory and the social forces tradition are indeed simply not interested in the breakdown of the previous existing order, whilst the transitology paradigm – even in its more nuanced and sophisticated elaboration – has not proposed any plausible framework to analyse the sudden breakdown of an authoritarian regime, without negotiations having taking place, in the face of a mass-based uprising. Looking elsewhere, it therefore seems reasonable to ask whether studies on revolution are more promising in this regard.

4. Does the studies on revolution provide better theoretical lens?

After the publication of Theda Skocpol's (1979: 4) *States and Social Revolutions*, her definition of revolutions as "rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures; [...] accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below" has emerged – at least for many decades – as the classic reference. In the early 2000s, however, Jack Goldstone (2001) challenged this structuralist definition, suggesting that many revolutionary episodes have not led to the permanent transformation of institutions, let alone class structures. Tackling this seemingly problematic aspect, Goldstone (2001: 142) provided a new definition of revolutions as "an effort to transform the political institutions and the justifications for political authority in a society, accompanied by [...] formal or informal mass-mobilization and non-institutionalized actions that undermine authorities". In the same year, and in a quite similar fashion, although without a comparable emphasis on the process, Goodwin (2001: 9) argued that revolutions are "irregular, extra-constitutional, and sometimes violent changes of political regime and control of state power brought about by popular movements". Since then, a bitter debate among Skocpol's structuralist perspective and the more process-oriented view proposed by Goldstone has taken root, both sides finding cyclical opportunities to reassess their reciprocal positions whenever social reality has introduced new empirical elements to the discussion. In this regard, the recent Egyptian events have not been an exception at all. In particular, Joel Beinin and Brecht De Smet, two leading scholars of Egypt and North African labour movements, have given a new impetus to this long-lasting dispute. As insightfully underlined by De Smet (2014a: 12), the fact that Skocpol's definition turns a particular outcome of the revolutionary process "into a primary determinant of its categorization as a 'revolution'" is problematic for two reasons. To begin with, a process can be defined as a revolution only *post factum*. Secondly, "the notion of a *failed* revolution becomes problematic, since its success [...] becomes a precondition of its definition". Whilst the latter aspect has been substantially ignored by Beinin (2014), he has fully addressed the former, stating nevertheless that he "cannot think of any other valid criterion". In spite of these seeming weaknesses, Beinin (2014) has rightfully exposed the main problematic aspect of Goldstone's definition – that is, terming "virtually any significant historical change a revolution of some sort". To a large extent, this was implicitly recognised by Goldstone (2003: 55) himself when he argued that his definition "excludes both coups and civil wars that change only rulers, not institutions or the structure of political authority". In other words, whereas Skocpol excludes uprisings and mass-based revolts from below that led to 'mere'

institutional changes without affecting both the class structure and the founding ideology of the regime, Goldstone includes them. Seen in this light, it should be clear that the disagreement is partially related to ‘where the threshold has to be put’.

However, this does not tell the whole story. As pointed out by De Smet (2014b), “this is not just a semantic debate on the word meaning of revolution”; and there is an intrinsic contradiction between framing revolutions as processes and define them simply according to the outcome. Likewise, excessively stressing the processual character of politics might not be any less problematic. During Richard Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, it is likely that the Chinese Prime Minister, Zhou Enlai, when he was asked about the impact of the 1789 French revolution, misunderstood the question. Yet, his famous answer – “too early to say” – astonished the audience, fostering clichés about the differences between Chinese and Western mentality. However, if the response became, so to say, legend, it was because no one would have supported the view that the French revolutionary process was still ongoing at that time. In other words, politics should be understood as a process, but it is formed by cycles. That is why, although this thesis recognises the important theoretical points made by De Smet, it adopts Beinín’s ‘consequentialist’ perspective as the lesser of the two evils. Even if “the most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historic events”, it is not simply their entrance into the political arena that frames a revolutionary process (Trotsky 1932: xvii). History is full of mass-based protest movements that have neither been revolutionary nor carried out revolutionary processes. Moreover, Goldstone’s emphasis on ‘effort’ opens the door to a voluntaristic flavour, which is inherently problematic because the purposes of protesters during an uprising are so varied and contradictory that what matters more is the complex interaction of their actions rather than their subjective purposes. In conclusion, adopting Skocpol’s definition of revolution, it emerges clearly that none of the countries affected by the Arab uprisings experienced a revolution. Moreover, and much more importantly, considering several aspects that will be introduced shortly, a revolution was never really on the table. If this assumption is correct, it follows that the studies on revolution are not well-equipped to deal with the Arab uprisings. In this regard, it is of paramount importance to justify this assumption.⁹

⁹ It might be argued by some readers that the stream of research on revolutions that criticized the state-centred perspective embraced by Skocpol and others could be of some interest here. After all, exactly because the process-oriented perspective analyses as revolutions what actually were ‘mere’ breakdowns of regimes, it deals with some cases that might be similar to those taken into account in this thesis. The problem, however, lies in the tremendous heterogeneity introduced by these studies. For instance, Goodwin (2001) moves from processes of de-colonialization to the Nicaraguan revolution, up to the dismantling of the Eastern bloc, being consequently forced to talk about exceptionalism in the case of Romania. As we shall see in the concluding chapter, the fall of

In those countries in which the autocrat was toppled, and therefore a window of opportunity was open, the non-disintegration of the state and coercive apparatuses – either as an effect of an external war (as in the 1917 Russian revolution) or the product of the revolt itself (as in the 1979 Iranian revolution) – the absence of sufficiently strong and organized revolutionary forces, as well as the non-emergency of what Tilly (1975: 520-521) terms “multiple sovereignty” were tremendous hindrances to the achievement of radical changes. Yet, it should not be forgotten that this was not the cruel joke of a mocking destiny. On the contrary, it was the mark of the unique and distinctive character of a specific process that could not have ended differently. Social revolutions need organized and revolutionary forces that can take advantage of a crisis situation. This does not mean that these forces are the architects of the revolution. As stated by Luxemburg (1906: 148) “revolutions do not allow anyone to play the schoolmaster with them”. Yet, without political leadership a would-be revolutionary movement is easily ‘kidnapped’ by reactionary groups – the former ruling elite, conservatives parties, the military, and the like. It is crucial to understand here that revolutionary forces are partially the product of the revolutionary process itself, but they have to already be well-structured and possess some kind of links to the lower classes when the uprising unfolds.¹⁰ Otherwise, it will be too little too late. After all, revolutions are rare events with few historical examples exactly because an array of multiple conditions has to be present at the same time. This was not the case, for instance, in Egypt and Tunisia, where ‘agency’ was certainly absent. It should not be forgotten that revolutions rest on a tremendous contradiction. On the one hand, the mere existence of a revolutionary force is physically prevented by the regime in power, particularly under authoritarian rule. On the other, revolutionary transformations without Leninist-type vanguard parties or radical and organized clergies cannot be achieved and consolidated. However, both these two ‘paths’, for different reasons, were not – so to say – available. Since the events of May 1968 in France, left-leaning movements in the West have largely opted for horizontal, participatory, and anti-hierarchical organizations (Foran 2014: 10). This was probably a reaction to the lack of basic freedoms imposed by the Soviet Union, something seen as a direct effect of the rigid and party-imposed chain of command. This new form of (non-)organization travelled throughout the continents and decades, being at the basis,

Ceaușescu shares many similarities with the Tunisian and Egyptian events, but Goodwin’s perspective is not useful at all, due to the fact that he treats the dismantling of the authoritarian regime in Romania as a deviant case.

¹⁰ As underlined by Skocpol (1979: 213) with reference to the Russian revolution, “although the Bolshevik Party was far from a doctrinally unified monolithic in 1917, it did retain relatively more organizational coherence than the other socialist parties, even as it remained much more closely in touch with popular sentiments in the urban centers”.

for instance, of the Zapatist movement in Chiapas (Mexico) in the 1990s and of the Global Justice Movement that gained momentum at the end of that decade. As it shall become clear in the chapter specifically dedicated to Egypt, the pro-democracy movement that took root there in the early 2000s was deeply affected and influenced by these examples. In Wallerstein's (2011) words, "the spirit of 1968 flows through [the] Arab Spring". Similarly, not well-equipped to take full advantage of the situation and to favour a revolutionary transformation were the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia. As stated by Olivier Roy (2013: 15), "the MB is not a 'revolutionary' movement but a religious-conservative one". To some extent, it seems that Political Islam was a revolutionary force for a brief period, which approximately covers two decades after the success of the Iranian revolution. By the end of the 1990s, its revolutionary potential had already ebbed, at least in North Africa. As a matter of fact, Ennahda was eradicated from Tunisian soil and forced into moderate and conciliatory positions, *Gama'a Islamiyya* – a splinter group of the MB that resorted to violence – was completely crushed in Egypt, and the long-lasting and uncertain civil war fought in Algeria was eventually won by the state against the Islamists, who were politically and physically annihilated.

Certainly, horizontal, non-hierarchical, and largely leaderless movements can be successful in bringing down long-standing autocrats and their cliques. To say more, thanks to their acephalous composition and the absence of a political center that might be either repressed or coopted by those in power, they are one of the most serious challenges to authoritarian regimes. Yet, they are not well-suited to build a new order. Arguably, the rapidity through which the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings reached the first and immediate goal – ousting the hated autocrats – was precisely the effect of the existence of a 'spontaneous' popular movement. However, when the task switched to achieving broader transformations in political, social, and economic terms, the absence of organized forces, deeply committed to achieving a revolutionary transformation, became an insurmountable hindrance. After all, it should not be forgotten that it is one thing to get rid of a dictator. It is something else to replace a system of class domination with another. Moreover, whilst democracy might be the second-best solution, being achievable also without democrats, a revolution is never a plausible compromise for the outgoing dominant coalition (and even for other sectors of society) and therefore it has to be won by revolutionaries.

In conclusion, both the literature on regime change and the studies on revolution leave us without proper instruments to analyse the Arab uprisings, in particular the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt. The attempt to provide a new theoretical framework is part of

the aim of the next chapter. As already anticipated, it is now time to further clarify the object of analysis, the tools used, and critically evaluate the previous findings on the astonishing wave of protests that rocked the Arab world.

5. Explaining what is worth to be explained: the breakdown of authoritarian regimes

It is not surprising that the study of regime change has attracted the efforts and attention of many scholars. After all, whilst the vast majority of political events do not affect many people's lives, restricted as they are in spatial and/or numerical terms, a regime change touches directly and in profound ways millions of human beings. Nevertheless, for many decades the boom in comparative democratization studies was not accompanied by complementary attention being paid to an examination of the dynamics of the breakdown of authoritarian regimes (Ulfelder 2005: 311–312; Levitsky and Way 2015: 97). A particular type of regime change – that is, the transition from authoritarian rule to liberal democracy – has therefore become the classic phenomenon studied, whereas all other forms of change – basically, the establishment of new and different forms of authoritarianism – were largely ignored (Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004: 372). Seen in this perspective, the downfall of authoritarian regimes was simply and logically assumed to be a necessary condition for the unfolding of the process of democratization, without serious attention being paid to either the peculiar political processes that govern non-democratic settings or to the sources of internal crises and breakdowns. The well-known cautious warning advanced by Juan Linz (1978: 7) many decades ago, and recently raised again by Eva Bellin (2011: 1), that the removal of an authoritarian regime does not mean that democratic institutions will necessarily emerge, has never been taken seriously by the discipline. On the contrary, not only has the breakdown of authoritarian regimes often generated illusory hopes about the fulfilment of individual and political rights in the new settings, but the kinds of transformations unleashed have also been analysed and judged against a supposed progressive line of development – that is, from authoritarianism towards liberal democracy. To be clear: criticizing this teleological and positivistic perspective is not equivalent to saying that living under a liberal democratic or authoritarian regime is the same. Evidently, it is not; and the months spent in contexts with limited individual freedoms and political rights have taught the writer of these words a thing or two about this. Yet, supposing that a specific institutional model, which gradually took shape over the course of centuries of economic and social transformations in a distinct region

of the world can be easily transcended globally is simply a modern form of Orientalism.¹¹ Our personal feelings notwithstanding, liberal democracy has historically achieved only partial and limited diffusion. As wisely noted by Ghassan Salamé (1994: 4):

One needs to remember that authoritarian regimes, of various persuasions, have been the norm in world history and democracy has been and remains exceptional. Hence the basic intellectual effort should be to explain why democracy has flowered in certain countries at certain times rather than, as is usually the case, to try to discover the reason for its absence from most countries most of the time.

Recently, empirical support for Salamé's view has been provided by Svolik (2012: 25–26). According to his data, between 41 and 114 dictatorships existed in any given year during the period 1946–2008. More specifically, authoritarian regimes comprised between a minimum of 39 per cent and a maximum of 75 per cent of all countries over the same years. Considering also the demographic weight of non-democratic states, it becomes clear that living under authoritarian rule has been a much more common experience than the current political science bias towards “democracy and American foreign policy's emphasis on democratization” would admit (Anderson 2006: 209). However, it cannot be overlooked that the number of non-democratic regimes started declining steadily starting in the late 1970s. This certainly remarkable, but still partial, trend was rapidly turned – especially in the years following the collapse of the Eastern bloc – into messianic expectations about the worldwide triumph of free market economics and liberal democracy, further reinforcing the theoretical bias towards studying democratization. Relying on these assumptions, Middle Eastern scholars interpreted the first signs of political liberalization that the region was showing in the early 1990s as the initial steps in the broader and supposedly imminent democratization process (Hudson 1988; 1991; Anderson 1991; Salamé 1994; Brynen, Korany and Noble 1995; Norton 1995/1996). Yet, rather than matching the political patterns followed in Southern Europe, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, these liberalization initiatives were undertaken to fend off more serious challenges during a phase of high instability in the region, showing therefore a cyclic fluctuation in the Middle East between liberalizing and de-liberalizing tactics or, to put it in Hinnebusch's (1998) words, between “compression” and “decompression” of formal politics. Then, once regimes were able to consolidate their position, the political openings were rapidly

¹¹ As shown by the spread of liberal democratic regimes in several and different contexts – that is, from Latin America to India, from Southeast Asia to Africa – it is absolutely plausible and feasible that a specific institutional arrangement might find applicability far beyond its ‘homeland’. However, this should not be taken for granted by scholars, but – first and foremost – be empirically assessed by them.

rolled back, leaving the so-called demo-crazy scholars frustrated and without the expected outcome of their analyses.

In the theoretical debate something started changing in the early 2000s when scholarly attention switched – at least, partially – towards authoritarianism. This was the effect of the persistence of authoritarian regimes in many parts of the globe – from the Middle East to China – as well as its re-emergence – bravely supposing that these had disappeared at some point – in former Soviet states. Moreover, many of those countries that had moved away from dictatorship towards more liberal forms of governance started getting stuck in a grey area, which had been theorized as short-lived and temporary. Recognizing the inherent contradiction in calling ‘transitional’ those countries that actually were not ‘in transition’ at all, Carothers (2002) developed new theoretical lens through which to understand the political environment. The call for an “end of the transition paradigm” found a vast audience in the subsequent years and an array of categories of ‘authoritarianism with adjectives’ – recasting the title of the influential Collier and Levitsky’s (1997) article – has proliferated. Scholars and students alike have thus become familiar with terms such as competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2002, 2010), semi-authoritarianism (Ottaway 2003), electoral authoritarianism (Schedler 2006), liberalized autocracy (Brumberg 2002), and pseudo-democracy (Volpi 2004). This terminological fecundity was matched in Middle Eastern studies by the development of the so-called exceptionalist literature (Brownlee 2002; Stepan and Robertson 2003; Bellin 2004; Posusney and Angrist 2005; Diamond 2010). According to this literature, the exceptional character of the region – which from the mid-1990s had emerged as the most coherent autocratic island in the world – might lay “not so much in absent prerequisites of democracy as in present conditions that foster robust authoritarianism” (Bellin 2004: 152). This stream of research, however, asking “what account[s] for the persistence of authoritarian regime[s]”, reversed the question more than it developed a different paradigm, producing therefore a tautology where the same factors that had previously been used to explain democracy’s fragility were now taken into consideration to explain the robustness of authoritarian regimes (Anderson 2006: 200–201).

Despite these theoretical shortcomings, the development of the exceptionalist literature was a clear sign that a new attention towards authoritarianism had already flourished. Basically, this evolved into two main streams of research. On the one hand, the inadequacy of the standard tripartite distinction between democracy (Schumpeter 1950; Dahl 1971), authoritarianism (Linz 1964), and totalitarianism (Arendt 1951; Friedrich and Brzezinski 1965) led to the establishment of new sets of typologies. This was the effect of several factors. First of all, the

numerical explosion of regimes combining both democratic and authoritarian elements, defined as hybrid by Diamond (2002), underscored the inadequacy of a simplistic democratic/authoritarian dichotomy. Rather, many political systems have tended to fall somewhere in between these two poles along a hypothetical continuum, suggesting also a general process of gradual convergence (Cavatorta 2010: 217). Secondly, as pointed out by Linz and Stepan (1996), between 1978 and 1987 only 9 countries fell into the totalitarian classification. That is, more than 90 per cent of modern non-democratic regimes were labelled as authoritarian (*Ibid*: 39). Evidently, this made totalitarianism residual and authoritarianism a catch-all and meaningless category. Recognising these shortcomings, other forms of non-democratic regimes have been proposed. Among these, the most well-known have become post-totalitarianism (Linz and Stepan 1996), sultanism (Linz and Stepan 1996; Chehabi and Linz 1998), and neo-patrimonialism (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997). In a similar fashion, Barbara Geddes (1999a) classified authoritarian regimes as personalist, military, single-party, or amalgams of the pure types. In her important article, however, Geddes not only provided a meaningful differentiation among authoritarian regimes, but also laid the foundations for the second, and by far the most fecund, current of research in the authoritarian field, which has concentrated scholarly attention on the factors that contribute to authoritarian stability. In general, four aspects have been considered critical for the persistence of authoritarian rule: *a*) the institutional setting; *b*) the economic performance; *c*) the presence of natural resource rents; and *d*) the historical origins of the regime (Levitsky and Way 2015: 98–104).

Following Geddes's (1999b: 33) findings that single-party regimes are more stable than military or personalist ones because intra-elite conflicts are limited by there being wider access to the spoils of the system and by there being greater opportunities for career advancement, scholars have analysed the role of ruling parties (Smith 2005; Brownlee 2007; Geddes 2008; Magaloni 2008), legislatures (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gandhi 2008; Wright 2008), and the structure of government-opposition relations (Lust-Okar and Jamal 2002; Posusney 2002; Lust-Okar 2004, 2005; Albrecht 2005; Schwedler 2006; Blaydes 2010) in enhancing authoritarian regime durability. Although the institutional tradition has developed many relevant insights, the empirical support for them has not been unambiguous. The second line of research has focused on economic aspects, considered either as a regime's performance or natural resource wealth. In particular, economic growth – and the consequent capacity to distribute patronage – has been regarded as crucial by some authors (Przeworski and Limongi 1997; Geddes 1999a; Reuter and Gandhi 2011). Consequently, sudden economic downturns or profound economic crises have been seen as elements of (possible) political

instability. Others scholars, by contrasts, have pointed to the so-called ‘resource curse’ – that is, the paradox of plenty. In this regard, the rentier state theory has underlined that having an abundance of natural resources, and in particular oil and gas, strengthen autocrats (Beblawi 1987; Luciani 1994; 1995; Karl 2007). According to Ross (2001), for instance, the direct and huge amount of resources that accrue directly to state’s coffers may be used to allow the population to not pay taxes, to co-opt opponents, and to finance powerful coercive structures. As in the case of institutions, however, the capacity of dictatorships to survive poor economic performance has varied sharply, whilst the relation between being a rentier state and having authoritarian rule has been questioned (Fish 2002; Herb 2005; Haber and Menaldo 2011). In sum, although the actual relevance of the institutional environment, economic performance, and natural resource wealth has been fully recognised to explaining regime outcomes, the direction and relevance of these effects has been less clear. Moreover, the heterogeneity of the findings has convinced some scholars that economic and institutional variables have to be mediated by some contextual aspects. The specific historical circumstances in which an authoritarian regime takes shape have therefore been put at the forefront in the explanation of authoritarian institutions’ longevity, finding empirical support for the view that regimes that arose from revolutionary or armed liberation struggles tend to last longer (Smith 2005; Levitsky and Way 2015; 2016; Hinnebusch 2015a).

The academic debate centred on dictatorships’ durability has been the fertile soil in which a “post-democratization era” in Middle Eastern studies has flourished (Heydemann 2002: 60). This new trend of analyses, recognising that *waiting for Godot* was no longer a powerful strategy for shedding light on regional transformations, adopted a post-positivist perspective and focused on those factors and mechanisms through which authoritarian regimes protect and transform themselves (Schlumberger 2000; Heydemann 2002; Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004; Anderson 2006; Hinnebusch 2006; Volpi and Cavatorta 2006; Schlumberger 2007; Heydemann 2007; King 2009; Valbjørn and Bank 2010). Rather than examining changes at the systemic level – that is, to the regime *type* – this new current has aimed to analyse alterations *within* regimes (Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004: 385). In this regard, while the exceptionalist literature criticizes “the blindness (*of democratization tradition*) to the actual continuity in the apparent changes” this new line of critique concerns “the lack of attention to the changes in the apparent continuity” (Valbjørn and Bank 2010: 189–90) (*Italics mine*). Nevertheless, as underlined by Teti (2012), post-democratization analyses have failed to challenge at an epistemological and ontological level the previous dominant paradigm, reproducing therefore many of its drawbacks. Arguably, the most

important one has been the failure to understand democracy as a “category of action” (*Ibid*: 7) and not merely as a neutral category framed in a liberal and narrowly procedural fashion. Ignoring Dahl’s (1971: 8) discrete warning that “since no large system in the real world is fully democratized, I prefer to call real world systems that are closest to the upper right corner polyarchies”, the post-democratization current has, on the contrary, transformed a contingent model of democracy, rooted and developed in the Western tradition, into the universal archetype of democracy (Teti 2007). Seen in this light, it is not surprising that, despite their claims, post-democratic scholars have failed to develop a paradigm that might consider authoritarianism as something more than just the mere absence of democracy, and ending up stressing that “Arab polities are homogenous insofar as they are characterized by an authoritarian mode of governance” (Schlumberger 2007: 7). Yet, this seemingly homogeneity hides tremendous differences in the way in which these regimes work and survive, making this theoretical tradition not ready to assess the sources of institutional breakdown.

This thesis aims precisely to reinforce the renewed theoretical attention towards authoritarian regimes discussed at length in this section. Yet, it will tackle some aspects that have been largely overlooked in the previous analyses. In particular, scholars’ overwhelming concentration on the dynamics of dictatorships’ durability has meant that there is nearly a complete lack of studies on the endogenous and exogenous causes of authoritarianism breakdown. This is not surprising. After all, the interest in studying the way in which authoritarian regimes work has mainly been a theoretical response to the previous general expectation that dictatorships would rapidly disappear from the political realm. However, focusing on the self-reinforcing mechanisms of reproduction of authoritarian institutions, scholars have implicitly neglected the possibility that long-lasting – but certainly not eternal – legacies might come to an end. This has produced two negative consequences. On the one hand, with the exception of post-democratic studies, it has been disregarded that even those authoritarian regimes that have lasted over time have done this through undergoing relevant changes in their structure and in the ruling coalition. On the other, the discipline was ill prepared to deal with the Arab uprisings in 2010–2011. This is not to say that otherwise these events would have been predicted. To a large extent, the non-predictability of the protests – and in particular of their magnitude – was a crucial element in the development of the protests themselves. Yet, being caught off guard by these exceptional events and without there being any serious accumulated knowledge about the downfall of authoritarian regimes, the discipline has relied again – with modest, if not completely disappointing, results – on the transitology paradigm. In conclusion, it seems it is time not only to stress the importance of

studying the other side of the coin – that is, authoritarian rule – but also to inquire into the elements and sequences that bring about the downfall of authoritarian regimes.

6. Defining the breakdown of an authoritarian regime

As stated by Geddes (1999b: 29), “the ends of authoritarian regimes are [...] problematic”. Partly, this is because, as powerfully explained in the same paper, “different forms of authoritarianism break down in characteristically different ways” (*Ibid*: 1). Military coups, street demonstrations and unmanageable crises, voluntarist exits, popular uprisings, and assassinations are just a few – arguably the most famous and common – examples of this complexity. This great heterogeneity has induced many scholars to either completely avoid furnishing a definition of the breakdown of authoritarian regimes (Ulfelder 2005) or implicitly assumed from the specific type of authoritarianism analysed a supposedly general definition that is actually not general at all. Before dealing with and critically evaluating these previous attempts, or even non-attempts, it seems worthwhile to provide a definition of authoritarian regimes. As stated by Juan Linz (1964) many decades ago, there are five key dimensions – pluralism, ideology, mobilization, leadership, and power – on which an authoritarian regime distinguishes itself from a totalitarian one. Although totalitarian regimes are a tiny and residual category nowadays, Linz’s definition of an authoritarian regime remains in Leonardo Morlino’s (2012: 55) words “the most useful one”. Sharing this view, this thesis will adopt Linz’s (1964: 294) ‘classic’ definition, in which an authoritarian regimes is described as a:

Political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones.

After having clarified what an authoritarian regime is about, it is possible to go back to the previous discussion of the problematic ways in which authoritarian regimes end. As already stated, some scholars, relying on the specific cases analysed, have turned the peculiar ways in which authoritarian regimes can come to an end into the quintessential definition of authoritarian regime breakdown. For instance, analysing six Latin American countries led by a military strongman between 1955 and 1961, Robert Dix (1982) deals with a particular

variant of authoritarianism – in his own words, “the personalistic dictatorship”. In similar contexts, the ousting of the autocrat can certainly coincide with the breakdown of the authoritarian regime *tout court*. Yet, this is not necessarily the case. As soon as the geographical and temporal horizons are broadened, the picture indeed becomes much more complex. As exemplified by the Mexican case, where for many decades leaders left office every six years after recurrent, although certainly neither free nor fair, elections, the departure of a dictator and the breakdown of an authoritarian regime are two events that do not always go hand in hand. In Marc Plattner’s (2014: 6) recent words, “changes in government do not necessarily amount to changes in regime”. This is not to say that the dismissal of long-lasting autocrats is an irrelevant event for the durability of authoritarian institutions. Recognising that many authoritarian regimes in different world regions have been strictly linked to the fortunes of their leaders, the contrary, rather, seems true. However, it should not be overlooked that even in the most personalist or sultanistic regime, an autocrat is always the expression of specific economic and political interests. In other words, there is always, in Antonio Gramsci’s (1975: 869 Q7S21) words, an “historical bloc”. In this regard, it is reasonable to count an authoritarian regime as defunct when either the dictator and his dominant coalition are physically ejected from power or these actors, although formally still in charge, completely lose control of the political process, being either forced to concede free and fair elections or be overthrown by the establishment of new authoritarian rule.

Two specifications have to be added to this definition. To begin with, following strictly the former part of the definition, a reader might conclude that the Latin principle *simul stabunt simul cadent* can be applied to the autocrat and his coalition. As already specified, this can be proved true for personalist authoritarian regime, but much less for those based on a strong single-party. Moreover, in some specific occasions, which often coincide with the outburst of protests that menace the system as a whole, the dominant elite can dismiss the highest actor on the political scale to protect its positions. As underlined by Brecht De Smet (2016: 205), “when it became obvious that the masses would not accept an ‘honorary’ exit for the president, Mubarak had to be sacrificed on the altar of the counter-revolution”. Likewise, trying to anticipate a similar scenario and to appease protesters, dictators might expel from power some key actors of their coalition in a desperate attempt to protect their position. The Egyptian events provide here other empirical evidence. During the famous eighteen days of relentless protests important parts of the dominant coalition, from Interior Minister Habib Al-Adly to steel-tycoon Ahmed Ezz, up to the expected new President Gamal Mubarak, were sidelined. In sum, locating the threshold where the downfall of an autocrat is not banal

continuismo under another leader, or the ejection of some key parts of the dominant coalition is not a mere political reshuffle within the same “historical bloc” is problematic. Secondly, and with regard to the latter part of the definition, assessing whether the incumbents are still truly in power or not during a process of ephemeral political liberalization is clearly feasible only retrospectively. In fact, it is not unusual that the process of breakdown could be involuntarily brought about by the dominant elite that, either seeking a new legitimization through a partial and instrumental political opening or retracting under the pressure of collective protests, triggers a reactive sequence that ends up in some, completely unexpected, ways (Collier and Mahoney 1997: 286–287). In these convulsive phases of political opening it is nearly impossible to understand the direction of the process and this, in turn, should be a warning against the *presentist* syndrome that affects the discipline.¹²

In conclusion, this thesis considers Ben Ali and Mubarak’s ouster from power as the date of the breakdown of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. This is not because these two countries perfectly fit “the personalistic dictatorship” described by Dix (1982). For sure, a huge and increasingly relevant concentration of resources and power in a few hands took shape in the pre-2010 period in the two countries. As stated by Stepan and Linz (2013: 27), “before the Arab upheavals of 2011, the regimes in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Egypt, and Tunisia all displayed (to one degree or another) some features of sultanism”. Yet, “none of [these] non-democratic regimes is as sultanistic as was that of Trujillo”. The crucial aspect here is therefore that the downfall of the two autocrats brought about at the same time a significant transformation in the “historical bloc”. In Egypt, the military – who had been gradually sidelined from the rooms of power, receiving economic compensations to its retreat to the barracks – was able to reassess its prominent role at the expense of the Ministry of Interior, of the ruling party, and of the ultra neo-liberalist clique that had coalesced around Gamal Mubarak (Kandil 2014: 5). In Tunisia, in contrast, the middle classes and the export-oriented bourgeoisie in the textile sector, and especially those sectors that were located in geographical and political terms far away from the Carthage palace, freed themselves from the organised economic mafia centred around the Ben Ali-Trabelsi clan. In this way, these social groups

¹² To give an example, after the military, carrying out a coup, had blocked the so-called democratic experiment in Algeria in January 1992, the country did not immediately plummet into civil war. This was a slow and incremental process in which the two parts – the Islamists and the state – increasingly relied on violence to make their voices heard. To some extent, whether Algeria was living through a civil war remained debatable also at the end of 1992. Nevertheless, working with retrospective lens, scholars agree nowadays in locating the outburst of civil war in January 1992. As already discussed with reference to the definition of revolution, there is no shame at all in declaring that convulse political events become clear only after a while.

challenged that corrupted, speculative, and parasitic economy based on the President's family and cronies. In Tunisia, more than elsewhere in the Middle East, it seems that the main winner of the social and political transformations experienced by the country was the industrial and productive bourgeoisie. Needless to say, Algeria represents a case of authoritarian stability.

7. Previous findings on the Arab uprisings

When unexpected changes happen, two interrelated tendencies often develop. On the one hand, political analysts produce retroactive predictions, seeking to find out how the *impossible* became the *inevitable*. On the other, euphoric views that foresee imminent and far-reaching transformations are developed relentlessly. Both these two trends took form after the Arab uprisings in 2010–2011, which seen in this light were not an exception at all. In particular, after some long-lasting autocrats had been defeated and others were seriously challenged, scholars started believing that everything was changing in the Middle East. According to one observer, the region was living its 1989 (Way 2011), while others theorized that what was unfolding was nothing less than the fourth wave of democratization (for a general critical assessment of these statements, see Diamond 2011). More seriously, the expected sunset of authoritarianism in what had been regarded for decades as the most inhospitable geographical environment to the development of liberal democratic institutions, cast doubts on the validity of the paradigm of authoritarian resilience that – as underlined previously in this chapter – had emerged as dominant in the 2000s. While scholars adopting this approach never stated that authoritarian institutions were inevitable, too much attention was paid by them to what occurred at the level of the state, ignoring the role of the movements of protests from below, centred both around workplaces and everyday life (Pace and Cavatorta 2012: 127). As expressed by Schlumberger's (2007: 14) own words, the general perception was that “for the foreseeable future democratization remains off the agenda in any Arab country”. Evidently, this does not mean that post-democratization studies completely ruled out any possibility of change in the region. However, they suddenly appeared as outmoded and incapable of dealing with a changing Middle East, leading many scholars to think that Samuel Huntington (1991: 174) was substantially right in assessing that “liberalized authoritarianism is not a stable equilibrium; the half-way house does not stand”.

The questioning of the validity of the paradigm of authoritarian resilience led to the resurgence of the theoretical assumptions made by the democratization tradition. In the immediate aftermaths of the outburst of the protests, transitologist scholars claimed victory for the long-awaited and much-desired process of democratization in the region, believing that their views would eventually be vindicated by history (Hudson 2011). In general, triumphalist expectations infected also sober scholars such as Brownlee and Stacher (2011: 1), who claimed without mincing their words that “on January 25 Egyptians launched the Middle East’s largest democratic experiment”. This pro-democratic infatuation emerged since the Arab uprisings were framed as essentially political in nature, rather than as being against neo-liberal policies. When, social and economic inequalities were taken into consideration, these were simply regarded as the effect of a cronyism that prevented the establishment of a truly ‘free market’. Assuming similar perspectives, it was fully logical to locate the problem in authoritarianism and to understand the sentiments underpinning the popular rage as favouring individual rights and more market-oriented policies (Hanieh 2013: 5). Once again, liberal democracy, combining civil and political rights at the individual level and liberal tendencies in the economic sphere, seemed the best option to square the circle. This new emphasis on the democratization paradigm developed into two streams of research. To begin with, scholars tried to read the ongoing events with the theoretical lens of the transitology literature, adapting its ‘classic’ category of analysis – that is, soft- and hard- liners; moderates and radicals; civil society; the necessity of pacts; and the like. Although caution was recommended and doubts about the future expressed, often underlining that “there is no inevitable move towards democracy consolidation”, there was an undeniable tendency to rely – as unmistakable shown by a Latin American lexicon – on insights developed by previous accounts of transitions from authoritarian rule to liberal democracy. Secondly, since scholars were caught off guard by the events, they reacted by providing activist-centred explanations of the uprisings, pointing to the economic, social, and political marginalization of the protesters. Concentration of wealth in a fewer and fewer hands, rising food price, high unemployment, youth bulge, corruption, and intensifying authoritarianism became therefore the classic factors used to explain the outburst of the protests (Masoud 2011; Schraeder and Redissi 2011; Teti and Gervasio 2011). It is hardly deniable that each of these grievances holds some explanatory value. Yet, they had plagued countries in the region for decades and never before had they sparked popular protests in any comparable way. Furthermore, the first country affected – Tunisia – did not rank poorly, at least by regional standards, in many regards. This led scholars to provide new and different sets of explanations, focusing on the

role of social media (Lynch 2011; 2014; Howard and Hussain 2011; 2013), on the snowball and inspiring effect (Bellin 2011; Patel, Bunce and Wolchik 2014), and on the increasing impunity as the protests exceeded some critical thresholds (Bellin 2011; Catalano 2012).

Subsequently, as many Arab autocracies have proved more resilient than initially expected, the newfound enthusiasm for democracy started vanishing. Several reasons explain why. First and foremost, with the partial and remarkable exception of Tunisia, new and old forms of authoritarianism emerged again as dominant in the region. Secondly, none of the conditions and actors regarded as crucial in the democratization literature were present in the Middle East. Finally, not only were the political demands not met, but also the social requests of the street went largely ignored, with neo-liberal policies that have remained the general framework to which different political regimes have been forced to adapt. In this regard, scholarly feelings gradually switched from the previous euphoric views to largely pessimistic expectations, spreading the idea that Arab regimes “were only following [Tomasi di] Lampedusa’s cruel verdict that if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change” (Valbjørn 2012: 28). This new theoretical turn brought about the revival of both exceptionalist literature and post-democratic studies. The former has underlined the crucial role played by the civil-military relationship, by the presence of monarchies, and by the combination of hereditary regimes and hydrocarbon resources (Bellin 2012; Yom and Gause III 2012; Brownlee, Masoud and Reynolds 2013). The latter, on the contrary, has embraced the perspective of a re-politicized Arab world in “transition to somewhere” (Valbjørn 2012: 30). That is, whilst a genuine and generalized democratic change in the region has been ruled out, the paradigm of strict and stable authoritarian continuity has been challenged too (Cavatorta 2015: 144; Rivetti 2015: 2–3). More generally, the reciprocal shortcomings of the democratization paradigm and of the authoritarian resilience approach led scholars to re-think concepts and insights that had previously been developed, stressing the necessity to revisit the problematic aspects of these two currents, rather than simply dismiss them because they were regarded as completely useless (Heydemann and Leenders 2011; Pace and Cavatorta 2012; Cavatorta 2015). As stated by Hinnebusch (2015b: 205), “neither of the rival paradigms – democratization theory and post-democratization approaches – that have been used to understand the Middle East have come out of the uprisings looking vindicated”. A call for more fruitful inter-paradigmatic exchanges, after decades in which each theoretical approach tried to get rid of the other, was heard too (see, for instance, Valbjørn (2015: 226–227).

As far as this thesis is concerned, these endeavours to re-calibrate the theoretical lens through which the outburst of the Arab uprisings and their aftermaths can be explained have not been terribly successful. It is time, therefore, to put at the forefront different research agendas. Some attractive paths were briefly sketched by Lisa Anderson (2006: 210) in one of the most quoted, but much less understood, articles on the Middle East:

The history of the states established by European imperialism (particularly their unique combination of weak extractive capacity and generous welfare provision), the role of international competition in shaping the regimes of the region, and the growth of informal economies that violate the boundaries of the nation-state and challenge our capacity to record and measure regional markets, all represent research arenas for comparative political science that would both enhance our understanding of the region and contribute to a genuine science of politics.

This does not mean that Anderson provides us with *the* solution. Nor does it mean that all her suggestions should be strictly followed. For instance, the existence of informal networks that do not respect the ‘holy’ national boundaries is certainly an attractive line of research, but it falls far beyond the interest of this thesis. Yet, it seems that, directly or indirectly, some of the main problematic aspects of the previous theoretical traditions have been fully grasped by the American scholar. Starting from what is just beneath the surface of Anderson’s thinking, there has been too much emphasis on the institutional level in the last decade. This statement might sound weird for many. After all, not too much time has gone by since Snyder and Mahoney (1999) underlined the puzzling omission of institutions in theories of regime change. According to them, this scholarly lack of attention towards institutions was surprising because “regime change fundamentally involves institutional transformations” (*Ibid*: 103). Developing an integrative approach between structural analyses – which were predominant in the initial phases of the study of regime change – and voluntarist approaches – which took the upper hand in the 1970s and 1980s – Mahoney and Snyder (1999) in another, but strictly related, article advanced three strategies to deal with the often ignored institutional meso-level of analysis. There is no interest here in dealing with and sketching these strategies. What is crucial, on the contrary, is simply underlining that the spread of these contributions, as well as the unfolding of other theoretical trends brought about a boom in institutional-based studies in the 2000s. Furthermore, they were not restricted to the study of regime change, but started to be applied – as indicated by the diffusion of the authoritarian resilience paradigm in the Middle East – to the analysis of several political phenomena across different sociocultural boundaries.

This ‘institutional revival’, however, has not been without problems for the discipline. As pointed out by Pace and Cavatorta (2012: 127), the notion of upgraded authoritarianism was always missing the unintended consequences that any form of change or upgrading brings about. Even more seriously, the institutional level has been theorized as completely autonomous, suffering no constraints from internal and external socioeconomic forces. Seen in this light, it should be straightforward why any possibility of radical change was ruled out by this theoretical approach. After all, as long as institutions are seen as operating in a vacuum, any reconfiguration of the authoritarian setting is clearly understood as a defensive – and arguably successful – response of the regime to challenges. This thesis, on the contrary, conceives the institutional environment as the locus in which the effects of macro-structural forces become visible and the balance of power among social classes take distinctive and concrete form. This does not mean – as is often concluded – that the institutional setting is fully determined by forces at a higher level of analysis. There is room to manoeuvre for those in power, although the structure influences the ‘limits of the possible’, setting the boundaries of a playing field within which political agency develops its own strategies.

In conclusion, rather than analysing the institutional level as the last source from which changes come, the scholars who are searching for answers to the unresolved puzzles raised by the Arab uprisings should move upwards in the level of analysis towards macro-variables. This thesis embraces this theoretical perspective in two ways. To begin with, it reassesses the relevance of the notion of class as an important tool – among others – to explain the dynamics of social and institutional change. In so doing, the widespread belief that the political economy of the Middle East can be fully understood through the state/civil society dichotomy is challenged and rejected (Hanieh 2013: 4). Although the advent of neoliberalism has brought about the nearly complete disappearance of the concepts of class and exploitation as analytical categories, many scholars have shown that these seemingly outmoded concepts can be extremely useful in explaining the Arab uprisings (El-Mahdi 2012; Hanieh 2013; Zemni 2013; Zemni, De Smet, and Bogaert 2013; Alexander and Bassiouny 2014; Abdelrahman 2015; Allison 2015; De Smet 2015; 2016; Beinin 2016). However, whilst many of these accounts have been inspired by a strict Marxist perspective in which the crucial actor was the industrial proletariat and the expected dynamic at stake a revolution in Skocpol’s terms, there are not such biases here. Reconsidering the role of social classes does not simply mean taking into account workers and trade unions – as is often implicitly assumed by a mainstream political science that is no longer able to deal with structural factors – but also, for instance, the professional middle class and businessmen. Secondly, this thesis frames the various

countries and the whole Middle East alike into the capitalist world-system. This is not only because capital has fully become an international force that affects all continents and states, but also because the Middle East has historically been driven by European powers through first and extra-European imperialisms then towards an unequal and uneven integration into global capitalism, which has generated its dependent and fettered development (Achcar 2013; Hanieh 2013; De Smet 2016).

8. Comparative Historical Analysis (CHA) and process-tracing method

In sharp contrast to the study of revolutions – where works that have had a lasting influence have almost exclusively been built around small-*n* studies (Goldstone 2003: 41) – accounts of the breakdown of authoritarian regimes have been dominated by large samples and statistical analysis (Geddes 1999a; Ulfelder 2005; Svobik 2012). Considering also that the democratization literature – often characterized by a positivist reading of human history – has produced a much more mixed picture between quantitative and qualitative studies, this development is certainly surprising. After all, it seems hardly deniable that the rules of statistical inference based on normal frequency distribution are not a good fit when analysts try to shed light on large-scale, historical-based, and almost unique political processes. This thesis, starting from the premise that no research technique works better in absolute terms, emphasises the importance of choosing the appropriate tools to investigate the phenomenon of interest. Unfortunately, the spread of views that see as less ‘scientific’ qualitative studies based on a few cases and the raising of quantitative approaches to the sole logic through which scientific knowledge can be reached, has often led to an attempt to apply large-*n* analyses to almost everything. Not surprisingly, the results have been disappointing.

In this regard, it has to be kept in mind that the breakdown of an authoritarian regime is the product of a complex and “multifaceted stream of events, with numerous variables emerging as necessary but insufficient [in themselves] to produce the outcome” (Steinberg 2007: 182). Whilst large-*n* statistical studies are embedded in a logic of correlation between inputs and outputs, without clarifying the reasons for these correlations, small-*n* research starts from the premise that the causal outcomes are the result of sets of conditions. Therefore, the attention here is not on the causal *effect* – that is, on the magnitude of the causal relationship – but on the “*mechanism* through which causes and causal configurations exert effects within particular cases” (Thelen and Mahoney 2015: 15). In other words, whilst large-*n* analyses are

interested in highlighting the existence of a correlation between, for instance, economic grievances and the outburst of radical social protests, small-*n* studies examine – assuming that misery matters, but maintaining at the same time that it is insufficient in itself – how this variable works in combination with other aspects to determine the specific outcome. The starting point here is therefore the complex nature of a phenomenon that not only is seen as multifaceted, but also believed to be largely dependent on the context in which it unfolds. Abstracting a case from its context, in order to enlarge the applicability of the insights developed, might be a disaster if removing the context means also eliminating some of the crucial elements. As is widely known, by pursuing parsimony, large-*n* studies neither analyse individual causal factors as parts of larger combinations nor regard as (potentially) crucial the context – two aspects that might be extremely problematic in studies on the breakdown of authoritarian regimes. This is even more true, considering that the Arab uprisings have shown a different and, up to now, untheorized way in which authoritarian regimes can be defeated. As underlined by Gerring (2007: 40), “case study may be more useful than cross-case studies when a subject is being encountered for the first time or is being considered in a fundamentally new way”.

As is known, authoritarian regimes have been defeated hundreds of times since the end of World War II. Seen from this perspective, this is anything but a new phenomenon. However, what is at stake in this thesis is an attempt to shed a new and qualitatively different light on a phenomenon that has been constantly studied. This means, first and foremost, it aims to be hypothesis generating rather than hypothesis testing. A task that is much more feasible in small-*n* studies where the main goal is, so to say, to recognise the still unrecognised. Previous knowledge is a tremendous help for scholars, who might see the horizons only when standing on ‘the shoulders of giants’. Yet, previous knowledge can also be a heavy burden, ‘forcing’ scholars onto already trodden paths. Moving away from this comfortable situation is challenging, but the downfall of authoritarian regimes is not a unique and homogenous process. An aspect that has been well-described and synthesized by Jack Goldstone’s (2003: 43) insightful example of explorers surveying a large territory:

If the territory is fairly homogenous [...] sampling would produce a fairly quick, accurate, and reliable method of determining that territory’s main characteristics. If, however, the territory has substantial local variations, and if the explorers are as interested in those variations as in any general characteristics, sampling will be useless. Moreover, as is commonly the case, if territory has six or seven distinctive zones, then sampling may just produce confusing or inconclusive results, leading observers to imagine a fictitious ‘average’ character that actually

obtains nowhere. By contrast, if the explorers spread out, and each surveys and seeks to understand the character of a different zone, they can put together a map of the entire territory with far greater accuracy than an overall sample would provide.

Noting that large-*n* studies of authoritarian regime breakdown have not provided knowledge of high quality, it is likely that the ‘territory’ under examination is far heterogeneous.¹³ In other words, assuming that causal factors operate in the same way for all cases – that is, causal homogeneity – or neglecting that different combinations of causal factors might bring about the same outcome – that is, equifinality – may simply be erroneous starting points (King, Keohane and Verba 1994: 87–89; Ragin 2000: 50–51; Ragin 2008: 63).

Addressing these issues, this thesis relies on a comparative historical analysis (CHA) based on a systematic and contextualized comparison of three sufficiently similar cases. CHA is certainly not new as a mode of investigation. Rather, it has a long and distinguished tradition in the social sciences, dating back to Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Marx. The dominant role of comparative and historical investigation, which had remained unchallenged for centuries and was implicitly applied by – among others – Max Weber and Marc Bloch in the early twentieth century, started being threatened after the end of the Second World War when other approaches nearly completely eclipsed it (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003: 3). Barrington Moore’s (1966) *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* marked the symbolic revival of CHA, which would have found a new lease on life in the following decades through the publication of other studies focused on macro-historical phenomena of which there are only a few cases. At this point, however, a clarification of what a few cases means is needed. After all, it might also be argued that the breakdown of authoritarian regimes is not such a rare event as this thesis would suggest. According to Geddes (1999b: 3), for instance, since World War II more than 125 authoritarian regimes have ended. Considering also that two other decades have gone by, the dimension of the universe of cases is certainly even larger. Svoblik (2012: 6), analysing situations in which authoritarian leaders lost their grip on power – that is, a collection of cases that is much larger than the number of cases where there has been a real dismantling of authoritarian rule – counts no fewer than 316 episodes between 1946 and 2008, which is a feasible number also for statistical studies. However, two aspects have to be pointed out here. Firstly, the non-problematization of the concept of population (Ragin 2008:

¹³ Similarly, qualitative studies on the dismantling of authoritarian rule that dominated the discipline in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s have not been able to grasp the heterogeneity of the phenomenon, largely limiting the whole process to a *gentlemen’s* agreement at the elite level (see previous paragraphs for a detailed analysis of this literature).

1). In general, populations are simply seen as given in variable-oriented studies, ignoring that the broad differences existing between, for instance, Egypt and Libya, might suggest that treating these two countries as equivalent is not wise. Secondly, and partly linked to this, this thesis is interested in evaluating one specific, among many, way(s) in which authoritarian regimes break down. As shown by the already mentioned assessment provided by Svobik (2012: 6), only 32 out of 316 autocrats were removed by a popular uprising, implicitly rendering it impossible to apply large-*n* statistical analysis to this way of authoritarian regime breakdown.¹⁴

In conclusion, CHA should be seen as the best inquiry technique to analyse those quite rare processes in which authoritarian regimes are defeated by mass-based uprisings from below without pacts or negotiations. This is because these – as well as, for instance, social revolutions and state formations – are not static occurrences taking place at a single, fixed point. Rather, they are processes that unfold over time and in time (Pierson 2000; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003: 12). From this, two consequences follow directly. To begin with, as shown by historical sociology's concept of path dependency, history "matters" and "binds" (Mahoney 2000: 507). History *matters* because sudden political changes are largely the product of long-lasting historical sequences in which previous cathartic events set into motion specific event chains, which either self-reinforce themselves through what economists call 'increasing returns' or produce reactive responses that transform early events. History *binds*, on the other hand, because events at a given point in time limit future outcomes. Secondly, as long as political scientists try to explain the breakdown of authoritarian regimes with statistical analysis, they are likely to describe – just to follow Goldstone's example again – as flat a territory characterized by hills, mountains, and depressions. In contrast, CHA is concerned with the identification of the specific causal configurations that produce the phenomenon analysed, being interested not merely in telling a story but in uncovering the causal relationship among the diverse parts in the sequence.

In the early stages of the research, however, scholars are arguably able to simply identify that several factors covary. Evidently, this is not enough to determine whether these factors are causally related or not. In this regard "CHA scholars carry out process tracing tests, in which specific within-case observations – typically concerning empirical mechanisms – may count heavily for or against causal hypotheses" (Thelen and Mahoney 2015: 16). Process-tracing is an attempt to identify the causal chain and causal mechanism between an independent

¹⁴ Considering that the downfall of an autocrat does not automatically mean – as we have already seen – the dismantling of the authoritarian regime, this number is even more limited.

variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable (George and Bennett 2005: 210). In particular, following the tripartite distinction introduced by Beach and Pedersen (2013: 16–22), this thesis adopts an explaining-outcome process-tracing, in which the main aim is to study a particular interesting and puzzling outcome. It seems also that a particular ontological affinity exists between CHA studies and explaining-outcome process tracing. Indeed, whilst theory-testing and theory-building variants of process-tracing aim to test/build mechanisms that are applicable across a set of cases, explaining-outcome process-tracing aims to highlight the particular causal chain and mechanism that explain the outcome of interest in the case(s) analysed (George and Bennet 2005). In other words, explaining-outcome process-tracing does not claim to possess any universality beyond the particular case(s) studied. This distinction turns out to also be helpful to understanding the disagreement in the literature about the precise meaning of causal mechanism. This controversy seems to be strictly linked to the existence of two ontological positions on the nature of causality. On the one hand, deterministic scholars argue for the unquestioned presence of a specific outcome when the supposed crucial mechanism is at work. On the other, scholars who embrace a probabilistic perspective state that it is not possible to determine *a priori* the outcome of a process since mechanisms interact with the context. Explaining-outcome process-tracing refers to the former logic, given the fact that the context is already part of the picture. In this regard, the term *deterministic* is used primarily to refer to necessary causes in individual cases (Mahoney 2008: 417).

What has been stated thus far does not mean that CHA is without its difficulties and limitations. There are, first and foremost, the inevitable difficulties of finding historical cases that are fully comparable. Even when this is the case, given the infinite number of potentially relevant variables, it is simply impossible to take all of them into account. This means that CHA can be applied only with the aid of solid theoretical concepts and hypotheses based on the insights developed by different disciplines and schools of thought. In other words, explorers have to know before leaving their tents in the camp what they are looking for, otherwise the risk of getting lost among potentially infinite sets of explanations is extremely high. Secondly, CHA starts from the assumption that the units being compared are independent from one another (Skocpol 1979: 39). However, not only is this never the case, but it is also more hazardous when some sort of contagious effect among neighbouring countries – as certainly happened during the Arab uprisings – has been present. This thesis is written with full awareness of the risk of overdetermining the influence on the events of those

structural factors and agency considered, and therefore moderation throughout the text as well as in the concluding remarks is embraced. Finally, CHA is not good at finding universal knowledge about all instances of an ahistorically constituted population of cases across all sociocultural contexts. However, this should not frighten scholars too much. After all, the starting point in adopting CHA is exactly the irreducibility of social and political processes to single equations. Context, history, and timing matter for CHA. As stated by Nietzsche (1979: 33), “do not, above all, confound me with what I am not”.

9. Looking ahead

This chapter has provided a general picture of the thesis, starting from the inability of both the democratization literature and studies on revolution to fully grasp the Arab uprisings. Consequently, the main object of analysis – that is, the breakdown of authoritarian regimes – has been specified and previous studies on authoritarian regimes and the Middle East have been reviewed. First and foremost, however, the chapter has pointed out that a new theoretical lens to explain the uprisings that swept the whole region in 2010–2011 are needed. This will be exactly the main task of the next chapter where an original theoretical model is provided through which the complex process that brought about the defeat of some of the authoritarian regimes in North Africa might be better explained. The key argument here is that mass-based revolts can be successful only when an implicit formation of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition takes place. This is the product of several factors. Some of these, especially when a broader comparative perspective is adopted, might appear as contingent or simply related to the cases analysed. Others, in contrast, are more likely to be structural and recurrent elements in the process of breakdown of an authoritarian regime. For instance, the narrowing of the basis of the regime in the period – which might cover more than a decade – that precedes an uprising is arguably a crucial element, making possible the establishment of a broad coalition in the opposition ranks and, to some extent, the uprising itself. Similarly, the degree of exploitation of the lower classes is often on the rise on the eve of an uprising. Yet, this can be the product of several and different factors – an external war, a sudden collapse of the price of a key commodity for the economic wealth of the country, an IMF intervention, and the like. This thesis will try to move up on the “ladder of abstraction” in order to provide concepts that have fewer attributes and therefore fit more cases (Sartori 1970: 1040). Having said that, it has to be kept in mind that this is a regional-based study, without any specific

necessity to travel beyond North Africa and the Middle East. In other words, whilst providing insights that might be applied elsewhere is certainly a goal, the price to be paid for it should not be the quality and accuracy of the study itself.

In the second part of this work, three country-based analyses will be developed. This will allow for an in-depth and historically framed examination of Tunisia, Egypt, and Algeria, which not only reveal similar causal patterns (among the former two countries), but also differences between Algeria, on the one hand, and Egypt and Tunisia, on the other, as well as among the two ‘success stories’. The attempt here is to provide chapters with a standard and similar structure in order to make it easier for readers to make comparisons between the three cases. The general pattern is the following: a narrative and analytic description of the uprising, the political economy of the country with a specific interest in the last decades, the narrowing of the regime, the establishment of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition, and a general reassessment of the way in which the authoritarian regime was defeated. Only the chapter dedicated to Algeria presents some parts – for instance, the section dedicated to the contending explanations of the relatively quietness of the country in the turbulent period of the Arab uprisings – that are unsystematic¹⁵. This might be seen as partially problematic by some detractors. As far as this thesis is concerned, however, it is simply the plastic example of the extraordinary complexity that social scientists have to take into account in their research.

The demanding task of showing the common elements between the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, as well as of reviewing the main analytic considerations that emerged over the course of the study is left to the robust and possibly rich concluding remarks. Besides, it will be shown here that the peculiar way in which Ben Ali and Mubarak’s regimes were defeated – that is, through a mass-based uprisings in which neither pacts nor negotiations played any role – had already been experienced by other countries in various world regions at different times. However, these episodes have never been analysed as singular manifestations of a broader phenomenon, suggesting that this might become an interesting topic for a new research agenda that asks for a larger comparative lens – something I might be undertake at a later stage or that might also be undertaken by other scholars. After all, doing research is a never-ending process.

¹⁵ Moreover, in the Tunisia chapter there is a section specifically dedicated to the role played by the UGTT (*Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*). It is not the same for Egypt because the ETUF (*Egyptian Trade Union Federation*) was a completely different union that did not play a crucial part in the process of Mubarak’s fall.

Chapter 2:
THEORIZING THE DEFEAT OF AUTHORITARIAN
REGIMES WITHOUT PACTS

1. Setting the stage

Comparative historical scholars do not start searching the answers to their ‘big’ questions by exploring randomly an almost infinite territory. For sure, working with just a few cases, they know each one of these well. Yet, proposing historical-based analyses covering several decades of more than one case, their knowledge would never be enough to not get lost in the limitless number of potentially relevant paths and variables. In this regard, scholars working in this research tradition have to provide an *a priori* solid theoretical framework that can guide them through the difficult task of focusing on crucial elements and weighting them in the right way (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003: 12; Thelen and Mahoney 2015: 19). To be clear: this does not mean that the analysis of the individual cases is simply a second step that strictly follows the accomplishment of a satisfying general theory. On the contrary, induction and deduction are both valuable components, and what can appear to readers as the granitic general framework adopted once and for all by the researcher is actually the result of a continuous dialogue between theory and history in which many preliminary hypotheses have been tested and rejected. Final conclusions are reached only after a nearly endless process of iterations in which insights developed by previous general and midrange theories are used to initially develop and subsequently refine hypotheses about the causal process at work.

This chapter presents the conclusions of this continuous process of going back and forth between theory and cases. It is composed of two easily discernible sections. First, challenging the ‘classic’ literature, a different path that leads to the dismantling of authoritarian regimes is proposed. There are neither pacts nor agreements here. Autocrats are violently forced out of power by a mass-based uprising and by the failure of the architecture of the authoritarian regime to respond. Starting from the last and crucial steps in the process of downfall and moving backwards, the general picture is briefly sketched. Second, each stage of this long process is fully analysed, embracing a macro-structural perspective inspired by the assumption that the success of a mass-based uprising is the product of the emergence of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition throughout the country. The establishment of a broad coalition that challenges the regime is made possible due to the narrowing of the regime itself. Something that, in turn, is induced, also against the autocrat’s will, by internal and external constraints – economic, political, and military.¹⁶ This approach might appear

¹⁶ The ‘narrowing of the regime’ is often replaced throughout the thesis by the ‘shrinking of the historical bloc’. These two expressions are rather similar, although they do not completely overlap. As will become clear in the next sections, the latter not only underlines the link between political groups and social forces, but it also

redundant to many readers – after all, it could be argued, the same argument is presented twice. Yet, this is an attempt to introduce the main theoretical insights gradually, avoiding a too violent and demanding departure. Besides, this shows the way in which the thesis has been thought out and developed, with more structural elements having been introduced step by step. The logic is driven by the insights developed by inductive process-tracing, which proceeds “backward from the outcome by sifting through the evidence in an attempt to uncover a plausible sufficient causal mechanism that produced the outcome” (Beach and Pedersen 2013: 169).¹⁷ This shows clearly that the study has never been driven by the attempt to demonstrate that ‘some scholars or some theories were right’. On the contrary, it was the disappointment felt with less far-reaching elements that pushed towards more general ones. For instance, many scholars have correctly assumed (at least, in this thesis’s view) that the policies embraced by Ben Ali and Mubarak’s regimes in the last years narrowed significantly the basis of the ruling coalitions in the two countries. However, no explanation has been provided for this development, which should be seen as puzzling exactly because a classic and general premise of the discipline is that ‘no one wants to be kicked out from power’. Had Ben Ali and Mubarak dealt with no significant constraints, it follows that they would have built the largest possible coalition. This was not the case, meaning that internal and, above all, external pressures must have played a role. Otherwise, scholars have to assume that these seasoned dictators dug their own graves simply because they became politically erratic, arrogant, sultanistic, and ill-advised. All factors that probably were at stake, but that cannot in themselves explain the tremendous narrowing of the historical bloc that took place over the course of the 2000s. Considering these aspects, this thesis has moved on in search of much more plausible interpretations, combining views developed by many different theoretical currents – from political economy to the study of social revolutions; from the analysis of civil-military relations to the institutional-focused literature. The attempt to bring together all of them in an overarching theory, which might shed new light on a completely overlooked way in which authoritarian regimes can be defeated, should be seen as one of the major contributions of this thesis.

provides a better theoretical lens to study the contingent character of the dominant coalition, which is constantly subjected to centrifugal tendencies.

¹⁷ Evidently, the distinction between deduction and induction is more formal than real, given the fact that scholars often end up adopting an iterative strategy in which both these two strategies of research are present. However, from a theoretical point of view, explaining-outcome process-tracing is driven by an inductive logic (Falleti and Mahoney 2015: 229–231). This does not mean that the analysis is conducted without theory. On the contrary, in order to understand where scholars should focus their attention, theory is crucial in inductive research.

2. Successful mass-based uprisings: Reading the process from right to left

This section provides a general hypothesis of the unfolding of the process that leads to the success of a mass-based uprising against an authoritarian regime. It draws on many of the specific insights developed by the regime change literature, studies on revolution, as well as Middle Eastern experts. To a large extent, nothing is original or innovative here. The main merit of this study – if merit is present at all – is its attempt to propose a new and possibly insightful reading of the relation among those aspects that previous works have underlined as relevant. In other words, this thesis does not challenge the existing literature by proposing a different explanation of the events. Rather, it advances a ‘causal package’, trying to move away from a single overarching principle of explanation and balancing regime-based accounts with accounts focused on human agency. All the conditions discussed in the model have to be seen as necessary but insufficient in themselves to bring about the breakdown of an authoritarian regime under pressure from the masses.

Before introducing the model, two important caveats are needed. To begin with, the model is something more than just a hypothesis, but much less than a general theory. It is the result of a careful combination of theoretical studies and single-case analyses, which has to be tested – first and foremost – in those contexts from which it has been derived. The theoretical quality of the model will, therefore, be judged by readers in the empirical-based chapters dedicated to the various countries and critically discussed in the conclusion of this thesis. Secondly, and strictly related to what was just stated, the model might have some potential to be generalized beyond Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria, but it has to be kept in mind that there is no intention here to identify the causes of the breakdown of authoritarian regimes in all regions of the world and during all eras. Leaving aside those regimes defeated by a compromise, something that falls far beyond the interest of this work, it is likely that the attempt to better specify the external pressures through which the authoritarian regimes in North Africa were ‘forced’ to reduce their bases will not fit well with the factors that gave rise to such dynamics in other regions at other times. Being aware of the crucial role played by the historical context, but seeing also the merits of insights that might be applied elsewhere, the macro-structural elements are immediately presented as specific configurations of much more general factors.

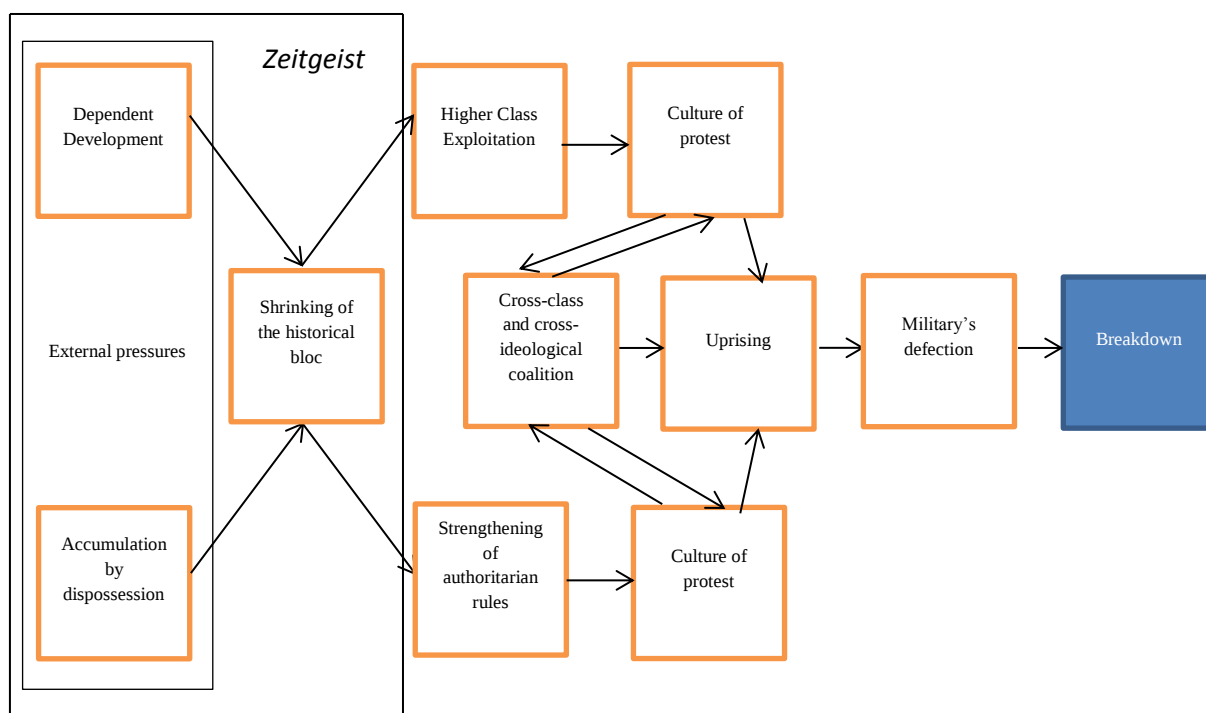


Fig. 1.1: A model of the breakdown of authoritarian regimes

Military's defection – In the late stages of a successful mass-based revolt against an authoritarian regime, the security forces turn their weapons against – or at least, assume a neutral and passive position towards – those who should be protected by them – that is, the authoritarian rulers – sanctioning therefore the downfall of the regime. After all, as long as the incumbent regime retains the loyalty of the armed forces no revolt can succeed (Russell 1974: 3; Barany 2011: 24; 2013: 62; Angrist 2013: 550). This is not to say that the military's backing is sufficient to make a mass-based mobilization successful. Many other political, social, and economic conditions have to be present. Nevertheless, the support or the acquiescence of the military is surely a necessary condition for defeating an authoritarian regime from below. Starting from the common assumption that officials act in the interest of the dominant elite, such behaviour can appear surprising. Yet, the unfolding of a crisis situation discloses two new elements. On the one hand, the armed forces are certainly an imperturbable monolithic bloc in peacetime, but they are subjected to centrifugal and possibly fragmenting tendencies during exceptional periods – that is, violent economic downturns, wars, uprisings, and revolutions. On the other, a crisis situation might bring about a dramatic increase in the state's role, leading officials to mobilize their own potential for partly autonomous actions (Skocpol 1985: 14; Block 1987: 67). The intervention of the military in favour of the protesters is never dictated by its will to unambiguously support the square's

demands. On the contrary, it is driven by the desire to protect the integrity of the military as an institution and to deflect the growing social soul of a political rebellion. On such occasions, although the armed forces are instrumental in removing dictators from power, their actions are not autonomous. On the contrary, they are responding to exceptional social pressures from below. In this regard, the breakdown of the authoritarian regime is not a ‘mere’ military coup (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015: 21–22).

Uprising – An uprising exceeds a conventional demonstration in its size, national impact, and persistence. It is characterized by the sudden eruption of non-armed (but not necessarily peaceful) mass protests over multiple days and throughout (almost) the whole country.¹⁸ The development of mass-based mobilizations of almost all sectors of society throughout most of the state’s territory for a significant period of time might bring about the defection of the military. The former is a necessary condition for the latter. There are several reasons for this. To begin with, the challenge from below has to be so powerful that the management of the crisis cannot be carried out by the Ministry of Interior alone. Rather, the Ministry of Defence becomes the institutional center that has to tackle the crisis (Bellin 2012: 131). In contrast, narrower or geographically bounded protests do not have a similar potential and can easily be repressed by police forces (Angrist 2013: 549). Secondly, even when very restricted protests are strong enough to represent a serious threat to those in power, it is unlikely that given their class, ethnic, regional, or confessional character, the army will not rely on its coercive power to repress them (Barany 2013: 70–72). By contrast, this might not happen when (nearly) all classes and political tendencies, claiming to be *the* people, are mobilised in the streets (Brooks 2013: 217; Nassif 2015: 78–79; Roll 2016: 26). Dealing with such a situation, the military’s decision to take repressive actions is hazardous because of the possibility of defections, ruptures in the line of command, and the splitting of the army into two or more factions may put at risk the stability of the military as an institution (Brownlee 2012: 145; Nassif 2012: 20). Moreover, it can also open up unpredictable scenarios. Seen in this light, it is not surprising that the armed forces, when the integrity of their organization is not strictly related to the survival of the regime, might stand with the demonstrators, sacrificing the autocrat and its ruling coalition to preserve themselves and the broader system (Lutterbeck 2011: 14; De Smet 2016: 205).

¹⁸ This definition is largely derived from Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds (2015: 20). However, whilst the three authors also add another feature – that is, the occupation and control of public spaces – this seems something more specially related to the peculiar way in which the Arab uprisings unfolded rather than a general aspect.

Cross-class and cross-ideological coalition – The spectacularly visible outbreak of a mass-based uprising in which students, the professional middle class, industrial workers, artisans, white-collar workers, echelons of the bourgeoisie, peasants, informal workers, and the unemployed are mobilized at the same time does not come out of a clear blue sky (Gana 2013: 22; Achcar 2013: 17). On the contrary, it is the product of the implicit formation of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition.¹⁹ The establishment of this coalition, however, is not the effect of an astonishing coming together of political groups and social classes with divergent material interests that are often at odds. Rather, it is a process of continuous and molecular accumulation of anti-regime energies that might have been going on for years, if not decades (Abdelrahman 2015: 29). In this long-lasting process, ‘economic’ strikes and ‘political’ demands fertilize one another, leading eventually to the explosion of the uprising (Zemni, De Smet, and Bogaert 2013: 890). Moreover, whilst the main requests of the working class, especially when there is not a direct link between workers and trade unions or labour parties, are largely ‘economic’, the blossoming of a ‘pro-democracy movement’ that challenges the regime on institutional and procedural issues is often the product of the middle class that lives in the main urban centres of the country, if not in the capital (Collier 1999: 14–17). In other words, each social class tends to have its own mobilizing structures, its own rallying cries, its own favourite locus for protesting, and its own social and political demands. These different material interests and political views are bound together by the common desire to get rid of the hated dictator (Dix 1982: 563). As soon as this goal is achieved, however, cross-class and cross-ideological coalitions frequently start to fracture (Goldstone 2011: 460).

Culture of protest – The formation of an implicit cross-class and cross-ideological coalition is favoured by the emergency of a ‘culture of protest’ (El-Mahdi 2009: 87–103). In this process, several elements are crucial: from challengers’ lived experience to their organizational capacities, from cultural heritage to ideology (Foran 2005: 21). To some extent, this moment has to be considered as involving the intervention of human agents onto the historical stage, through which existing feelings towards deep socioeconomic grievances and political marginality are transformed from passivity into activism (Angrist 2013: 548). The trigger of

¹⁹ In the last stages of a successful uprising nearly all social sectors and political groups are mobilized. However, it is likely that in the early phases of the uprising protests might be much more restricted in social, geographical, or political terms. To some extent, it is the unfolding of the uprising itself that allows for the ‘coming together against the autocrat’. Having said that, the nucleus of a social and political coalition has to be present given the sudden eruption of the protest itself, attracting other sectors and parties. In this regard, although the relation is not linear, the uprising has to be considered as the product of an already established broad coalition.

this process has often to be found in the gradual eruption of a culture of dissent, in which institutionalized practices are challenged by protesters, who partially re-configure the relation between the state and society. Apparently uninfluential and minimal breaks in the authoritarian domination might become a significant opening when opposition forces are able to capitalize on them. This tends to be easier when illegal social and political acts – for instance, a strike or a sit-in – are supported by a culture of opposition that may draw upon diverse sources of legitimation and inspiration. In this regard, as insightfully underlined by Foran (1997), it would be more correct to talk about a plurality of cultures of opposition and resistance. In Arab countries, for instance, cultures are multiple, ranging from secularism to Islamism, from liberalism to Marxism. A successful uprising is probably a complex and unique combination of different cultures of protest, which appeal to diverse groups in society and find an unstable point of agreement in the mobilization against the autocrat in power.

Greater class exploitation and strengthening of authoritarian regimes – Although the emergence of a culture of protest can produce what Kuran (1989: 42) calls “the spark for prairie fires”, throwing a match randomly into a prairie might not be enough to have a fire. Other elements have to be present as well. In particular, it seems that two *sine qua non* conditions are the presence of material and political suffering. To be clear: it is not enough for people to be ruthlessly exploited or to be cruelly excluded from politics for them to revolt (Bellin 2012: 136). Yet, misery and exclusion are critical (Foran 2005: 22). In this thesis, the cross-class and cross-ideological coalition hypothesis statement is split into its two main parts. In fact, the mobilization of different social classes, on the one hand, and the coming together of disparate political groups that jointly challenge the regime, on the other, are the effect of two distinct phenomena. The former is mainly a response to the increasingly high level of social and economic exploitation to which workers, peasants, and the lower segments of the middle class are subjected. The latter, on the contrary, is the product of the enhancing of authoritarian domination through which already limited political freedoms are restricted, power is concentrated in even smaller cliques, the regime assumes a clearer sultanistic character, and moderate opposition forces too are forced out from the institutional game. Having said that, two caveats are needed. To begin with, the relation between the abovementioned social, economic, and political grievances, on the one hand, and the emergency of a culture of protest, on the other, is all but linear. As shown, for instance, by the so-called political-conflict theorists, no matter how exploited an aggregate of people might be, they cannot express their refusal to accept their own situation without being part of some

minimally organized group with access to some resources (Tilly 1973: 436). In this regard, the deterministic equation ‘the greater the degree of exploitation and/or marginalization, the more likely the blossoming of a protest movement’ is not only ill-thought-out, but is also discredited by many historical records. Secondly, even if the formation of a cross-class coalition and the establishment of some form of collaboration between diverse ideological traditions are treated as two separate phenomena here, they are constantly interwoven with one another. A political landscape in which, for instance, Islamists and leftists are willing to collaborate together against the regime increases exponentially the likelihood of workplaces being mobilized. In the same vein, workers and middle class professionals’ protests might be tremendous springboards for broader collaboration among political groups (Abdelrahman 2012: 620–622; Zemni, De Smet, and Bogaert 2013: 890; Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 99).

Shrinking of the historical bloc – Whilst the adoption of neo-liberal policies and the strengthening of authoritarian regimes are often seen as two completely unrelated developments, this thesis starts from the assumption that they might be much more closely linked to one another than is generally believed. This is not to say that, for instance, cutting food subsidies for the lower classes and banning Islamist parties from participating in legislative elections always go hand in hand. After many years in power, autocrats tend to become more self-indulgent, to promote themselves as ‘presidents for life’, and to view critically any kind of opposition to their will (Dix 1982: 564). In short, as time goes by and without any reference to social and economic issues, authoritarian regimes tend to become more sclerotic and less inclusive. However, if it seems possible to talk about two partially related phenomena, this is because greater class exploitation and less political freedom might be the product of the same process – that is, the shrinking of the ‘historical bloc’. This concept, introduced by Georges Sorel and refined by Antonio Gramsci (1975: 1051–1052 Q8S182), sheds light on the existence of an alliance among political groups and social classes that – directly or indirectly – rule the country. In this regard, the meaning of ‘bloc’ is rather similar to that of ruling coalition. However, the first term of the concept – that is, ‘historical’ – also allows for an understanding of the formation and the development of this ‘bloc’ as something contingent and specifically related to the unstable ensemble of relations that characterizes a society (Roccu 2013: 26–27). Exactly in this regard, it has to be understood as ‘historic’ – meaning something neither fixed nor unrelated to the general context. Moreover, not only does the ‘historical bloc’ tend to change its internal composition constantly, but it

also enlarges and narrows its capacity to become hegemonic with regard to those classes and political forces formally excluded from the ‘bloc’, although de facto included in practices, norms, partial material benefits, and ideological discourses that lead them to accept – and sometimes even promote – a system in which they occupy a subordinate position. The internal composition of the ‘historical bloc’ and its capacity to become hegemonic are related to several factors: from cultural practices to the political system, from ethical norms to institutionalized procedures (Gramsci 1975: 869 Q7S21). Yet, the ‘historical bloc’ should be seen, first and foremost, as the product of the distinct strategy of capitalist accumulation chosen, as well as of the peculiar position of the country in the capitalist economy.

External pressures – Whilst capital is always driven by the constant need to valorise itself (Marx 1867: 342), it can realize this goal through different strategies – something that, in turn, might significantly affect the formation of the ‘historical bloc’. When for several reasons, which lay far beyond the scope of this thesis, accumulation unfolds in a phase of high economic growth fostered by the expansion of productive sectors, it tends to broaden ‘the limits of the possible’, allowing also the partial inclusion of subaltern classes and the establishment of a corporatist pact. By contrast, when capitalist accumulation is carried on through savage exploitation and dispossession – that is, through the ongoing presence of those practices that were typical in the process of ‘primitive’ or ‘original’ accumulation – the ‘historical bloc’ is necessarily shrunk in terms of both social and political forces (Harvey 2003: 144). This general premise is even more true in the periphery of the world, where countries for their internal development are subjected to the expansion of the economies of the core capitalist states (Dos Santos 1970: 231; Amin 1976: 294). This dependency forces the former to rely on the latter because they are not strong enough to ensure the autonomous development of their economies, being short of technological and financial means (Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Evans 1979). These disequilibria, although not eternal, have to be taken into account as long as they are present. In particular, the external constraints that a dependent development put on peripheral countries tend to be a tremendous burden for authoritarian regimes that after the outbreak of the third wave of democratization cannot propose any alternative legitimated model to liberal democracy. The necessity to justify themselves in transitional terms means that authoritarian regimes do not own any reservoir of legitimacy beyond the achievement of short-term goals – that is, restoring order, fostering economic growth, providing basic social services, and the like (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 15; Linz and Stepan 1996: 74; Grilli di Cortona 2016: 25) – something which, in turn, is arduous for

the already pointed out structural conditions. The ideologically unfavourable environment in which authoritarian regimes have operated in the last decades is therefore the ‘natural’ starting point.

Before dealing with this, however, it is important to summarize what has been done up to now. The eight factors underlined in this section lead to the development of the thesis’s primary working hypothesis – that is, *the breakdown of the authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Tunisia was the product of the combination of all eight of these factors*. This hypothesis does not claim to have any potential universality and therefore it will be – first and foremost – tested in the three cases analysed here. Obviously, it is immediately disconfirmed if either in Egypt or Tunisia some of the eight elements were not present. Moreover, the hypothesis is also rejected if in Algeria, where the regime did not break down, the aforementioned combination was present. In case the working hypothesis is confirmed, a brief attempt to look beyond North Africa to other authoritarian regimes that were defeated by a successful uprising will be proposed in the conclusion. It is important here to highlight two additional elements. First, whilst the model might be confirmed for the three cases examined, it is likely that further elements could emerge as relevant as soon as temporal and geographical horizons are broadened. Similarly, supposedly crucial aspects in Egypt and Tunisia might turn out to be merely regional-based and therefore non-structural. Second, it is assumed that any different combination of the eight factors would have brought about a different outcome in Egypt and Tunisia, but it cannot be ruled out that distinct combinations of the eight factors might bring about the same outcome – the breakdown of authoritarian regimes – in different historical and geographical contexts. In other words, equifinality is theoretically untenable in the three cases under investigation here, but logically plausible elsewhere (Ragin 2000: 50; Ragin 2008: 63). This chapter proceeds as follows. The theoretical ground on which the model is based is fully analysed and introduced, relying on insights provided by several and different streams of research and scholarly traditions. In the second and remaining part of the chapter, case selection is discussed and justified, making it clear why Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia were chosen.

3. Un-legitimized authoritarian regimes in search of legitimacy

Regimes do not operate in a celestial and isolated world. Global trends, which are the product of complex processes, heavily affect their capacity to survive. Before looking at the political

and economic meanings of this perspective, it is useful to examine the role of ideologies in the process of legitimization of each regime. The starting point here is the common and almost completely accepted view that no regime can survive in power simply through ruthless violence. On the contrary, it has to be regarded as legitimate by some sectors of the population, not necessarily the majority in numerical terms, but certainly crucial in many other respects – economic, social, political, or geographical.

As underlined by O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986: 15), in the post-World War II period, authoritarian regimes were no longer able to promote themselves as long-lasting and stable solutions to the political and economic problems of their societies, as well as the best possible modes of governance. Although they are right to highlight the historical dynamics, the two authors arguably predate this trend or, even better, transcend a European tendency – that is, the discrediting of right-wing authoritarian regimes after the collapse of the Fascist and Nazi projects in Western Europe – on a global scale. After all, it is difficult to deny that non-democratic views, such as Peronism in Argentina or Pan-Arabism in Egypt, were not widely considered legitimate in the 1950s and in the 1960s. Such regimes presented themselves as alternative and better models to liberal democracy, challenging the individualistic and Western flavours of democracy on the basis of an organic and corporatist views of society. Since the 1970s, however, the situation has been profoundly different (Grilli di Cortona 2016: 25). Linz and Stepan (1996: 74), for instance, underline the sharp contrast between interwar Europe and the Europe of the mid-1970s and early 1980s. In the former period, the *Zeitgeist* ('the spirit of the times') saw competition among, at least, five different ideological models – Communism, Fascism, Catholicism (on the basis of corporatist and integralist movements), authoritarian constitutional monarchy, and liberal democracy.²⁰ By the late 1970s, Fascism had already been defeated for a few decades, the Catholic Church after Vatican II (1961-1963) had embraced much more amenable positions towards liberal democracy, and Communism in the aftermaths of the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia had lost its 'propulsive impetuosity'. It was not only that authoritarian regimes, from 1974 onwards, started being overthrown in several and different world regions, but also the fact that they were forced to present themselves as transitional regimes that were moving, given the presence of some challenging conditions, at a slower pace than other countries towards democracy. This general trend was sharply accelerated by the sudden downfall of the Eastern

²⁰ Whilst some of these models were logically at odds among them (for instance, Communism and authoritarian constitutional monarchy), others have much more in common and were not in mutual antagonism. Working with the concept of corporatism, the ideological models might be reduced to four or even less.

bloc in the late 1980s.²¹ Although there are no plausible reasons to support teleological views that see one ideology – that is, the democratic ideology – as the last solution that human beings can find to respond to their social, economic, and political problems. Francis Fukuyama (1992: 45), writing just a couple of years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, was certainly right in pointing out that “the apparent number of choices that countries face in determining how they will organize themselves politically and economically has been diminishing over time [...] What is emerging victorious, in other words, is not so much liberal practices, as the liberal *idea*”.²²

This is not to say that non-democratic regimes have suddenly disappeared throughout the world in the post-Cold war era. As underlined in the introduction of this thesis, if a trend is ongoing it is actually a decade long decline in civil and political freedoms in several parts of the world, as well as a worsening of the democratic quality in long-established liberal democracies (Freedom House 2016).²³ Especially after the 2008 economic crisis, the attractiveness of the world’s leading democracies has been declining and the attractiveness of authoritarian regimes has seemed to be growing. Having said that, it remains indisputably true that “democracy continues to benefit from its superior legitimacy” (Plattner 2014: 15) and authoritarian regimes in the last decades have no longer justified themselves as superior models. On the contrary, they have presented their regimes as transitional, justifying their existence by reference to the aims at combating violent groups or terroristic organizations, pursuing economic development, and guaranteeing basic social services to the lower classes (Grilli di Cortona 2016: 25).

The unfavourable context in which authoritarian regimes have operated since the mid-1970s means that they are characterized by “ideological schizophrenia”, constantly switching the sources of their legitimation, and by a higher structural vulnerability (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 15). The latter is an indirect product of the former, and also the main interest

²¹ Arguably, only Islam maintains a pretention to challenge liberal democracy, making the prospect for the spread of democracy harder – that evidently, as shown by Stepan and Roberts (2003), does not mean impossible – in Islam-majoritarian countries. However, in the last decades Political Islam has assumed in several and different contexts a much more favourable inclination towards liberal principles. It remains unpredictable whether this trend is something similar to what was experienced by Catholicism in the 1960s and 1970s or just a momentary and short-lived move.

²² Once the unacceptable partisan character of Fukuyama’s book is removed, it emerges clearly that the Arab uprisings have not been – as many scholars have loved underlining – a disconfirmation of his thesis, but actually the strongest possible corroboration. Decades of social and economic grievances, of political marginalization, and of mistreatments led people into the street without any mobilizing ideology, except a generic reference to the liberal idea. The Arab uprisings were arguably the least ideological irruption of the masses into the political arena in the last two centuries.

²³ It might be seen as contradictory the fact that there is no “universal principal of legitimacy other than the sovereignty of the people” and the present difficulties of liberal democracy to establish itself in new countries or even to maintain the positions achieved, yet this is the current context (Fukuyama 1992: 45).

of this thesis. The general premise is quite elementary. Assuming that no regime can survive without some sort of legitimacy and recognising that alternative models to liberal democracy have either collapsed or lost momentum, authoritarian regimes can only legitimise themselves in instrumental terms – that is, through the achievement of short-term goals. Some of these – for instance, maintaining social order, combatting extremist groups, and protecting the country – are by their own nature politically temporary. That is, they are general aims that assume political significance as long as there is a serious threat against the regime. Other goals, in contrast, are constantly present. Achieving economic growth or providing social services and basic goods are not momentary purposes. The problem here, however, is two-fold. To begin with, without a goal, there can be no legitimacy. Unlike in the interwar period, authoritarian regimes cannot rely on ideological reservoirs of legitimacy that might counterbalance economic stagnation, incapacity to provide expected social services, and the like. On some specific occasions, the inability of authoritarian regimes to achieve these goals can also push them to search for internal legitimation through risky military operations abroad, which eventually might usher in the end of the regime (for instance, the Greek military adventure in Cyprus in 1973 and the Argentinian attempt to recover the Falklands in 1982). In other circumstances, a partially illegitimate regime can voluntarily promote an electoral plebiscite to re-affirm its position, which may unexpectedly turn into a double-edged sword for the regime itself (the 1988 Chilean case is certainly paradigmatic here). Secondly, and much more importantly, authoritarian regimes in the aftermath of the Third wave of democratization have largely been concentrated in the periphery of the world, meaning that their choices are only partially autonomous.²⁴

4. External constraints

Without a doubt, Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974: xx) conceptualization of the world-economy as an unique system based on a single international division of labour in which "classes [are] classes of this world-system [...] state structures [exist] within this world-system" is a

²⁴ This statement merits being specified. First of all, as shown by the Chinese case, there are some great and remarkable exceptions. Secondly, resource-rich authoritarian regimes might be extremely wealthy countries (for instance Qatar and the UAE), but their wellbeing is often built on a sand castle, potentially heavily affected by sudden downturns in rents. In this regard, these regimes share something with 'classic' peripheral countries – that is, they are only partially masters of their own destiny.

tremendous overgeneralization.²⁵ No less naïve, however, would be to assume that all the countries of the world have the same margins of manoeuvre. The crucial aspect here is not to state – as superficially made by nearly everyone – that modern economies are “interdependent” or that we live “in a globalized and connected world” (Cardoso and Faletto 1979: xvii). On the contrary, it has to be pointed out that the ‘interdependence’ between two or more countries is never neutral; rather, due to the fact that some countries own sectors crucial to production and capitalist accumulation, such as the technological and financial sectors, this means that other countries are affected by a dependent development. That is, their economy is conditioned by the expansion of other economies to which the former are subjected (Dos Santos 1970: 231). Needless to say, being a core, semi-peripheral, or peripheral country is not an eternal and unchallengeable destiny. As shown by the astonishing economic development experienced by some countries once regarded as non-core countries (for instance, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and more recently Vietnam) there are certainly available ways out to this unpleasant situation. Yet, as long as the chains of dependent development are not broken “the economic system of the periphery cannot be understood in itself, for its relations with the center are crucial” (Amin 1976: 294). Moreover, whilst dependence has assumed different and historically determined forms (Dos Santos 1970: 232), the tremendous contradiction on which its present status rests is that of a state that “constitute a nation without being sovereign” (Cardoso and Faletto 1979: 200–201). That is, a state that, being subjected to heavy external constraints, has extremely narrow room to manoeuvre. In general terms, the aforementioned aspect has become increasingly problematic since the early 1970s, when the ‘Long Boom’, facilitated by the beneficial – at least in capitalist terms – organized destruction brought about by World War II (Hounshell 1984: 330), started to come to an end and the excessive capital that was circulating was unable to find opportunities for profitable investments.²⁶ This has ‘forced’ capital into two directions: abandoning Keynesian social pacts throughout the world and opening new outlets. There is no interest at all here in presenting an ideological argument. As is often the case, general trends are subjected to overgeneralizations that might sound weird when the focus switches to specific regions or countries.²⁷ Nevertheless, it seems largely true that capital has assumed a much

²⁵ For an insightful critique of Wallerstein’s world-system theory see Skocpol (1977) and Teschke (2008).

²⁶ A rather similar situation was described by Hannah Arendt (1951: 135) with reference to the depression of the 1860s and 1870s in Britain.

²⁷ After all, in the last decades many African countries have expanded or simply built *ex novo* more efficient and generous welfare systems, whilst the presence of either favourable economic conditions (for instance, the discovery of a huge oilfield in Norway) or a congenial political context (for instance, the substantial stability of a

more ‘aggressive’ strategy of accumulation, based on the continuous presence of those predatory practices that characterized the so-called ‘primitive’ or ‘original’ accumulation (De Angelis 2000: 2) – that is, the “historical process of divorcing producer from the means of production” (Marx 1867: 874–875). As brilliantly proposed by David Harvey (2003: 144), “since it seems peculiar to call an ongoing process ‘primitive’ or ‘original’”, these terms can be substituted by the concept of *accumulation by dispossession*. To put it in a nutshell, what accumulation by dispossession does is simply to release a set of assets – land, raw materials, labour power – at a very low cost. In this way, over-accumulated capital can turn these assets to profitable use. This is possible thanks to the action of those extra-economic forces – first and foremost, the state – through which, for instance, forceful expulsion of resident populations and the conversion of various forms of property rights can take place. As already pointed out by Cardoso and Faletto (1979: 202), “the state has become a strategic element, functioning as a hinge that permits the opening of the portals through which capitalism passes into industrializing peripheral countries”. Since the early 1970s, the contemporary presence of the abovementioned aspects has brought about the emergence in many peripheral countries of an apparent unnatural alliance between “multinational, state, and local capital” (Evans 1979), which has often replaced the previous corporatist pact based on the integration of the masses (Kamrava 2014: 25–26). It is important to state that, as not all Third World societies experienced dependent development, not all peripheral countries ended up promoting neo-liberal policies that created social and economic grievances among diverse sectors of the population, including peasants, workers, and the middle class (Foran 2005: 19). In this regard, the objection that some peripheral countries followed different paths of development is not damaging for this study.

This paragraph has pointed out two crucial arguments. To begin with, from the 1970s onwards, authoritarian regimes have operated in a challenging ideological environment in which the global establishment of the democratic ideology as the sole universal and legitimate principle has forced them to justify their regimes in transitional terms. Thus, the achievement of economic growth, of internal order, and of some kind of basic social services for the lower classes has emerged as crucial for the stability of the authoritarian regimes. At the same time, however, for peripheral countries that have not been able to escape dependent development, not only has the fulfilment of these goals become increasingly arduous, but many of these countries have partially lost control of their own destiny, being forced by external forces –

social-democratic consensus in Sweden) have meant that Keynesian-inspired models have not disappeared entirely.

mainly, economic and political – onto a slippery slope. Secondly, this thesis hypothesises that a successful mass-based uprising against an authoritarian regime arises from dependent development and ‘aggressive’ strategies of capital accumulation based on predatory practices. The claim, which will be tested in the country-based chapters, is that these two conditions are necessary, but insufficient in themselves.

5. The shrinking of the ‘historical bloc’

Starting in the 1970s, a new ruling alliance among multinationals, local businessmen, and the state apparatuses emerged throughout the Middle East. This new forged coalition brought about the dramatic shrinking of the ‘historical bloc’, bringing about the violent expulsion of the lower classes from the ruling bargain in many peripheral countries. The ‘historical bloc’ is formed – according to Antonio Gramsci (1975: 869 Q7S21) – by the structure and superstructure; “that is to say the complex and discordant ensemble of the superstructures is the reflection of the ensemble of the social relations of production”. A ‘historical bloc’ is “the moment of unity of a society”, when “economic relations and forces of production, accumulation strategies, political state forms and class alliances, and cultural practices and signs” are integrated into a whole that encompasses something greater and different from the sum of its parts (De Smet 2016: 17).

As far as this thesis is concerned, the concept of ‘historical bloc’ has to be understood in light of its two constituting elements. On the one hand, whilst capitalism as a mode of production tends to have a fixed character, which is determined by its inherent tendency to reproduce itself through a continuous expansion and the constant need to be valorised, the ‘historical bloc’ discloses the specific and unstable ensemble of the social relations of a society (Roccu 2013: 26–27). It is exactly in this regard that can be defined as ‘historical’ – that is, contingent and specific. On the other, it is a ‘bloc’ because it represents the alliance of classes and groups under the umbrella of a nationalist project, even when this ‘bloc’ pursues policies and strategies that are neither nationalist nor corporatist (Morton 2007: 96–97).²⁸ The unstable and ‘historical’ character of this ‘bloc’ is partially an effect of the specific strategy of capitalist accumulation followed and, at the same time, the product of the country’s dependent or non-dependent development. However, this does not tell the whole story. Otherwise, there would

²⁸ This paradox can be explained through the need for numerically limited forces to present themselves as actors that pursue an interest that is much broader than its own.

be a deterministic relation between these structural factors and the formation of a specific ‘historical bloc’. Cultural practices, signs – what Gramsci (1975: 1250 Q10S13) termed as the “ethico-political forms” – matter too. We have already discussed at length this aspect with specific reference to the sharp decline of legitimized ideological alternatives to liberal practices in the last decades. As has been noted in the previous paragraphs, this has not always been the case. In the polarized international environment of the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, after many peripheral countries had got rid of direct or semi-direct colonial domination, ideas of actual national sovereignty and greater social justice fused together in a project of “developmentalist populism” (Cardoso and Faletto 1979: 129). For sure, the prevailing accumulation strategy pursued at the global level, the acute competition among two ideologically incompatible super-powers, as well as other structural aspects, made possible the incorporation of the masses into a nationalistic and developmentalist project. However, possible does not mean necessary, and political and ideological factors played a role too. The establishment of popular-authoritarian regimes was common to many peripheral areas of the world, but it should not be overlooked that other regions and countries did not follow this path, pursuing strategies – as several Asian countries did – based on accelerated industrialization and fierce repression of workers. In this regard, although the words used by O’Donnell (1979: 56–57) to describe the “populist coalition” that was formed in several Latin American countries do not apply everywhere, they certainly fit well in several situations in the Middle East:

It was formed by relatively new sectors. What the coalition was against was quite obvious: the old oligarchies, the highly visible foreign-owned firms mediating between the international and domestic market, and the policies of free trade with which the old rulers had traditionally been associated. In terms of what it was for, the new coalition agreed on two basic points: (1) industrialization and (2) the expansion of the domestic market.

Even though some features of this “populist coalition” were globally shared, in each world region ideologies, institutions, and social conditions were different and unique. In the Middle East, for instance, the popular-authoritarian bloc that emerged was often an alliance between the military and the bureaucracy against the colonial power, the oligarchies, and large landowners (Hinnebusch 2006: 380–382). The embraced ideology was based on progress, modernization, development, and nationalism, with – after private capital had proved unable to foster capital accumulation and the state had massively intervened in the economy – a

strong ‘socialist’ and anti-imperialist tone. The adoption of distributive policies and the establishment of a corporatist bargain included the masses into the ‘historical bloc’, although in a passive and non-autonomous position. These popular-authoritarian blocs were, however, unstable and contradictory, and therefore started disintegrating quite quickly (De Smet 2016: 161). As suggested by Richard and Waterbury (2008: 189), this was the effect of the inherently transitional character of state-led ISI policies, which soon exhausted themselves in huge state deficits and had to be replaced by export strategies. In this regard, economic liberalization was seen as the key to regime survival both in the Middle East and Latin America.

Moreover, two other aspects have to be considered. To begin with, the myth of ‘Arab socialism’ was shattered after the dramatic defeat suffered by Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in the Six Day War against Israel in 1967, discrediting therefore the anti-Western path to modernity that had been promoted by authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. Secondly, relatively new social forces emerged. Although surprising, state capitalism possesses a strong tendency to concentrate capital accumulation in private hands as an effect of the beneficial role played by the state’s huge interventions in the economy (infrastructure, enlargement of the market, protection against foreign products, and the like) for those sectors that are not fully nationalized. This led to the embryonic formation of a capitalist class, concentrated in trade, finance, and small-scale activities (Dillman 2000: 25; Achcar 2013: 77; De Smet 2016: 170). Besides, the classic leading role that the state bureaucracy plays in state capitalism brought about its increasingly conscious role as an independent ruling class. The coming together of all these factors brought about the reconfiguration and shrinking of the ‘historical bloc’. The military was appeased with economic rewards, whereas the popular classes were simply marginalized. Nevertheless, the mass revolts that hit many countries in North Africa in the late 1970s and the huge stream of revenues that accrued in state coffers (for instance, oil and gas rents, naval tolls, tourism, and workers remittances) made it possible to foster an accumulation characterized by rent-based strategies (Owen 2004: 116; Pfeifer 2012: 205). This served the interests of the new ‘historical bloc’ – formed by the state bureaucracy, commercial and financial capitalists, medium landowners who had not been dispossessed, and foreign multinationals – and, at the same time, it did not sideline completely the lower classes, which partially benefitted by the expansion of the state, both as an employer and a redistributor of wealth.

However, the sudden collapse of hydrocarbon prices in 1985–1986 drastically diminished the influx of petrodollars – in all its forms – and led the end of this ephemeral phase. Nearly all

North African countries were forced to turn to the IMF and WB to save their economies from bankruptcy, and neo-liberal policies started in earnest (Owen 2004: 116; Hanieh 2013: 47–73; De Smet 2016: 172–176). It should be noticed that this move occurred around the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Soviet block, the end of the Cold War, and the widespread belief that free market policies based on pro-capitalist and individualistic principles was the only way out. With a slight delay, therefore, North Africa followed Latin America on this trajectory. However, in the former region there were much fewer possibilities to reverse the process – as actually happened in a few Latin American countries in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This was related to two main elements. On the one hand, the failure of the previous policies, which had been presented as ‘socialists’ by the regimes, made a new U-turn towards the left extremely unlikely, given the extent to which Nasserism, socialism, and communism in its various tendencies had been discredited. On the other, whilst in Latin America neo-liberalism was nearly by default challenged by a leftist narrative, in the Middle East Political Islam emerged as by far the main rival of the regimes, establishing a preeminent position in the universities – once dominated by the left – in the professional associations, and making inroads also among industrial workers. This development was problematic because Islamist organizations have traditionally been inter-classist forces. They have been critical of the non-transparent way in which liberalization was carried on, of the disturbing concentration of wealth in a few hands, and of the lack of pious initiatives towards the poor. At the same time, however, Islamist forces have been largely pro-market and neoliberalist in essence (Roy 2013: 15). Moreover, fearing Islamism more than the regime in power, leftist forces throughout the 1980s and 1990s stood with the latter as the lesser of the two evils, limiting thus, if not completely obscuring, the anti-neoliberal option.

In this regard, the further shrinking of the ‘historical bloc’, from which also lower stratum of state bureaucracy, petite bourgeoisie, and small capitalists were sidelined, was not only the effect of the peculiar strategy of capitalist accumulation and of the peripheral position in economic terms of the Middle East. Rather, it was also the result of a political and cultural environment in which the only serious menace to the regime was actually a political tradition that largely agreed with the regime itself on economic matters. The absence for a while of a plausible resistance from below meant there was a strengthening of neoliberal policies, which went hand in hand with greater exploitation of the lower classes and increasing authoritarianism to shut down any channel of discontent. As underlined by Owen (2012: 6), the whole system was reduced to webs of personal, political, and economic relationships between the president, his family, and crony capitalists. Several constituencies that once were

the backbone of the regimes were gradually sidelined or lost their function as transmission belts – for instance, the ruling party, middle class professionals, and small and medium businessmen without direct links to the president’s inner circle – limiting therefore the basis of support for the regimes themselves. In Antonio Gramsci’s (1975: 1823 Q15S59) own words, this was “dictatorship without hegemony”.

To a large extent, it was exactly the lack of hegemony that forced authoritarian regimes in the Middle East to expand the degree of surveillance of society. In the last decades, the region experienced the evolution of security states, with the establishment of panoptical systems of control (Kamrava 2014: 27). Whilst greater freedoms and opportunities for personal enrichments were granted to a few, the overwhelming majority of society witnessed the closing of channels of political contestation and personal success in social and economic terms. Repressive and robust repressive apparatuses were combined with exclusionary states, which increasingly placed the leader above society (Foran 2005: 20). Unbelievable economic fortunes were concentrated in the hands of the ‘royal’ families – both in monarchical and republican regimes – and leaders started representing themselves as indispensable to the nation’s progress (Owen 2012: 38). As underlined by Stepan and Linz (2013: 27), on the eve of the Arab uprisings several regimes in the Middle East displayed some feature of sultanism. In short, authoritarian regimes became more authoritarian, exclusionary, and personalist than ever before. Although apparently unbeatable, their gradual move from hegemony to brutal repression meant that some authoritarian regimes in the Middle East were becoming giants with clay feet.

6. Reassessing the relevance of class analysis

As rightly underlined by Rabab El-Mahdi (2012: 133), since the advent of neoliberalism the concepts of ‘class’ and ‘exploitation’ have simply disappeared as analytical categories. A scenario difficult to predict in the post-World War II period when even a liberal standard bearer like Raymond Aron (1964: 87), in a book with the significant title *La Lutte de Classes*, was ‘forced’ to deal with these concepts. Certainly, he stated in a rightly pessimistic fashion that we are “at the same time obsessed by the notion of class and incapable of defining it”, but he could not ignore class analysis. Nowadays, in a completely different situation, non-mainstream scholars have to fight just to make it clear that, whether or not it is considered fashionable, “class remains a salient dimension for social life” (Lockman 1994: xxx). This

does not mean that politics is the direct and deterministic product of class struggle. Actually, classes have probably played a much more limited role in shaping the political arena than many scholarly traditions would have predicted. However, ruling out *a priori* the explanatory power of class analysis might be problematic, especially when the outcome of interest is a macrostructural process that cannot be explained at the elite level.

The appropriateness of applying class analysis has been challenged both on the theoretical level and on the basis of regional-oriented aspects. The former has largely been the effect of a stereotyped and farcical narrative about the role that classes – and workers in particular – should play. The overwhelming dominant economic and positivist reading of Karl Marx's works tends to represent the working class as a fixed entity merely defined by its objective position within the capitalist structure. Over time, it is argued, workers acquire greater class consciousness and act as a coherent and homogenous body that, pursuing its own interests, brings a social revolution and the establishment of a class-less order. Although romantic, such a narrative is completely unrealistic. Certainly, classes are the structural product of the objective relationship that is formed in the process of production between those who own the means of production and the direct producers (Callinicos and Harman 1987: 6). However, as made clear by Robert Cox (1987: 355) "if the production process creates the potentiality for classes, it does not make classes". This means that as long as classes do not recognise themselves as forces who share material interests, common experiences, and views of how society should be organized, their class potential remains latent. As elegantly expressed by Brecht De Smet (2015: 68), "whereas the process of formal and real subsumption of labour under capital [...] creates a workforce, it does not constitute the working population as a collective subject". What transforms a *class in itself* into a *class for itself* is a long-lasting and fiercely disputed question. To a great extent, it lays far beyond the subject of this thesis, which 'simply' hypothesizes that some sort of class action has to be present for the unfolding of a successful uprising against an authoritarian regime.

Beyond these general theoretical issues, some scholars have also expressed concerns specifically linked to the Middle East, a region in which class belongings have been often regarded as subordinate to religion, ethnicity, and tribes. As correctly underlined by Giovanni Sartori (1969: 207), "conflicts are not only economic and related to the class structure, but also regional, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and ideological". As long as social and economic conflicts are obscured by other cleavages, it follows that class analysis is scarcely useful for analysing and explaining politics. However, it should not be forgotten that the sectarian heterogeneity in Syria, for instance, is not an inherent natural characteristic, but as stated by

Allison (2015: 299) “it is socially constructed collectively produced and reproduced through access to the state and the political economy that it oversees”.²⁹ Besides, distributing resources and benefits not on the bases of class affiliation, but choosing regional, tribal, or linguistic belongings as the decisive elements, the regimes have softened the development of class solidarity (Zubaida 1995: 165). Again, the authoritarian character of Middle Eastern countries, as well as the establishment of state capitalism have significantly limited the expression of class interests – banning unions, associations, and categories – and have brought about the artificial creation of numerically relevant social classes not directly linked to the productive process. As underlined by Caraway (2016: 257), the context of late development creates “a smaller industrial working class, a larger informal sector, and a dominant role for the state, as opposed to the private sector, in industrialization”.

Although fully aware of these deadlocks, this thesis argues that this should not lead us to conclude that class analysis is counterproductive in the Middle East and that the expression of class interests should be made to disappear entirely (Owen 2004: 34). There are several reasons for this. First, the shrinking role of the state, both as employer and agent of wealth redistribution, from the 1970s onwards has brought about a sudden and never before seen class polarization in the Middle East (Achcar 2013: 19–52; Hanieh 2013: 47–73). This, together with the increasingly relevant role of the private sector, has not only reduced the traditionally huge ‘grey area’ between the owners of the means of production and direct producers, but they “have [also] moved the middle class towards greater heterogeneity, with the fortunes of some portions rising while others have fallen, resulting in greater autonomy from the state of those who prospered, and marginalization of those in decline” (Soliman 2012: 59). In other words, whilst Erik Olin Wright (1989: 6–7), in his studies on Western countries, has underlined “the embarrassment of the middle class” – that is, the disturbing evidence, at least for Marxist scholars, that “contemporary advanced capitalist society look anything but polarized” in class terms – the ultra-neoliberal stances assumed by many regimes in the Middle East, and actually not only there, have pushed exactly in the direction of greater class differences and polarization. This aspect suggests that class analysis might be particularly appropriate, especially when scholars focus on social and political episodes in which the masses have played a relevant part. Second, although there is no interest here in stating that class analysis is always crucial to understanding politics, there are some

²⁹ It is not always true that the mere presence of ethnic differences obscures class struggle. As underlined by Di Sotto and Grilli di Cortona (2016: 120), “class differences, regardless of religion, have been primary drivers of political developments, with issues of wealth distribution at the forefront of concern. Protests against the state, [...] were primarily ideological in nature, with ethnic/racial differences superimposed on ideological differences”.

circumstances in which this might be exactly the case. In this regard, it has to be noted that as long as religious, ethnic, and tribal divisions are of some relevance for society, the formation of a broad coalition against the authoritarian regime is unlikely. In contrast, when social and economic issues emerge as crucial, softening the other divisions in society, an anti-regime coalition might be established. It can be therefore concluded that the success of an uprising rests partially on the resurgence of economic conflicts in society, making it reasonable to focus on classes.

Despite this, class analysis remains problematic, especially in relation to the definition of the various social classes, as well as with regard to their internal heterogeneity. As underlined by Giacomo Luciani (2007: 163), these shortcomings are particularly relevant for the middle class:

The middle class *per se* has no other distinguishing feature except that it finds itself between a top class, comprising the elite, and a lower class, comprising the masses. [...] Hence the concept of middle class differs from the definition of bourgeoisie because the latter concept distinguishes between owners of the means of production and the rest.

Seen in this light, and considering the already mentioned process of social polarization, it is crucial to differentiate within the middle class, with the emergence of a “poor middle class” – that is, a social group with middle class aspiration, given its high degree of education, but whose material conditions have been steadily diminishing in the last decades – that should be seen as one of the most significant developments in recent times (Bayat, quoted in Kandil 2012: 199). Small business owners, professionals (lawyers, doctors, engineers, architects, pharmacists, and teachers), government employees, and students who come from these backgrounds have therefore been pushed into the ranks of the urban poor in labour and housing markets, often struggling to make ends meet in the increasingly large area of the informal economy. A second problematic aspect is to draw a clear and agreed to boundary between the middle class and the working class. The attempt to enlarge the former to civil servants and wage workers in the service sector has been challenged, for instance, by those scholars who have not limited the working class to blue-collar or industrial workers, but have enlarged it to clerical occupations (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 59). As far as this thesis is concerned, it is not possible – precisely because of the volatile and unstructured character of the middle class – to establish criteria that can be valid throughout different geographical

areas and historical periods. For contingent and practical reasons, two elements are pointed out here. Firstly, the middle class is restricted to independent professionals, high ranking state bureaucrats, and shop owners; whilst low paid wage workers in the service sector and government employees are considered white-collar workers. Secondly, despite the fact that the labour movement represents the unity of all workers, white-collar workers are not clustered together with blue-collar workers and the differentiation between those who – directly or indirectly – are critical to the creation of value and all the others is maintained.

7. A ‘culture of protest’ and a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition

The theoretical attention placed by this thesis on structural factors does not mean that the institutional setting is insignificant. After all, the interactions among socio-economic actors and political forces take place within specific sets of procedures, norms, and institutions that affect their behaviour in several ways. The development of a strong labour movement, for instance, is not only determined – among many other things – by the degree of workers’ exploitation, but also by the general institutional framework within which workers mobilize. In this regard, although the possibility of the regime – especially in peripheral countries – to shape the institutional setting is always limited, suffering the constraints imposed by internal economic elites, international organizations, and transnational capital, the meso level between structural and agency factors matters and has to be taken into account.

As far as this thesis is concerned, an authoritarian regime can be defeated by an uprising from below only when the opposition camp presents itself as a unique, or nearly unique, block. As already underlined in the previous sections, there are several reasons for this. Not only, in fact, do mobilizations that are restricted in ideological, geographical, or class terms have a scarce chance of constituting a serious threat to those in power, but they are also much easier to repress, given their partial and sectorial character. In other words, the recipe for victorious uprisings from below rests on the implicit formation of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition (Foran 2005: 15; Goldstone 2011: 457; Abdelrahman 2012: 615–18; 2015: 52–72; Angrist 2013, 549–550; Durac 2015: 245). Yet, where does this coalition come from? Is it really a sudden and astonishing coming together of almost everyone against the regime, or does what becomes spectacularly visible during the uprising actually reflect a long-lasting process that has gone on for years? And again, in which circumstances is the blossoming of this coalition more likely? This section addresses all these questions.

Before starting, however, a couple of additional observations are needed. To begin with, the formation of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition is defined as ‘implicit’ because it is not the result of a formal agreement. In this regard, there are neither written pacts nor roundtables. This general assessment is particularly true for social classes, which in general mobilize while disconnected from one another. What is crucial here is not the fact that representatives of peasants, industrial workers, and middle class professionals have to meet up and agree on a joint strategy of mobilization against the regime. Expecting something similar would be naïve. On the contrary, the crucial aspect is the pressure that acts of agitation in several and different economic sectors can put on the system, forcing those in power out on a slippery slope and inspiring other would-be opponents to take to the street. Secondly, and strictly linked to this, the gradual formation of this implicit coalition does not come, arguably, out of a clear blue sky, but is hypothesized as a long-lasting and molecular process in which the emergence of a ‘culture of protest’ is both the consequence of the initial, and often limited in strength and demands, mobilizations, as well as the necessary ingredient to foster more radical protests. It is certainly true that the actions of vast sections of the lower classes are dictated by the deterioration of their living conditions. Yet, this would not be enough to enlarge the sphere of politics beyond the traditional niche of middle class activists. Past experiences, the presence of a nucleus of militants, cultural heritages, and the existence of some sort of organization are all elements that might be crucial to help disgruntled workers and citizens to shout their anger, staging strikes and marches. It is not surprising that Bab el Oued in Algiers – the epicentre of the October 1988 events – was once again one of the main loci of the protests in January 2011. Similarly, the well-established spirit of workers’ militancy in Mahalla al-Kubra, or the links created during the long-lasting mobilization in Gafsa, were important sources of support for the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. In other words, militant workplaces or neighbourhoods are not randomly created by an invisible hand. They are instead the product of a unique amalgam of several factors, in which a constant dialectic between protesters’ consciousness and mobilizations is at stake. The implicit assumption of this thesis is therefore that emancipated men and women do not exist in a state of nature. On the contrary, workers and citizens learn by struggling in a complex process that can be described as a “pedagogy of revolt” (De Smet 2015, 89–101).

Thirdly, the cross-class and cross-ideological hypothesis will be split in the various country-based chapters into its two main parts, analysing therefore the collaboration among social sectors with different material interests and the cooperation among ideologically diverse political forces as two distinct phenomena. To some extent, this artificial decision does not

respect any real line of division and, as such, it might be contested in several ways, showing, for instance, that the interactions among ‘political’ and ‘economic’ protests are constant and relevant (Abdelrahman 2012: 620–622). Nevertheless, this is not only an attempt to reduce the overall complexity of the argument, but also a necessary strategy to deal with three particular aspects of the cross-ideological coalition. As we have already seen, social classes are not driven by an agreed and common strategy in their mobilization – something that, however, does not hold for political groups. Coalition building in the ‘political’ sphere – either driven by tactical considerations in general elections, or motivated by more strategic reflections and multiple-issues – are a nearly endless processes in which coalition partners dedicate an inordinate amount of time to coalition meetings (Clark 2010: 104). That is, there is a direct and voluntaristic contribution from the various political forces that agree to mobilize jointly. Moreover, considering that the political militancy is largely restricted – in authoritarian settings even more than in liberal democratic environments – to middle class members, a specific social class emerges as the crucial actor in this process. Besides, it seems that this picture is not altered by the ideological leanings of the various political forces. Nationalist, liberal, and Marxist formations are all middle class in their background; whereas Political Islam is arguably a bit more heterogeneous. Seen in this light, it does not seem an exaggeration to conclude that the role played by the middle class is unmatched. After all, it is the sole class with a role in each of the two horns of the coalition. Finally, the specific institutional environment, although important for any socio-economic and political force, affects the ‘political’ arena much more than the ‘economic’ sphere.

As far as this thesis is concerned, the formation of a cross-ideological coalition is much more likely in an “undivided, exclusive political environment” in which no opposition force is allowed to participate in the formal system (Lust-Okar 2004: 160). In this case, *ceteris paribus*, each opposition group might decide – calculating the extremely limited benefits achieved by being loyal to the regime – to mobilize together with the other opposition groups against the Palace, even though its member might agree on little more. Conversely, illiberal multi-party systems that grant some spoils to those political forces that accept participation in the institutional game without challenging the masters are – from a systemic perspective – more stable. Indeed, these are the most congenial settings to prevent the development of a potentially favourable environment to the establishment of what Robert Dix (1982: 563) terms a “negative coalition” – that is, the tactical cooperation among all opposition groups against the common enemy, the regime. Basically, there are two main reasons for this. To begin with,

in illiberal multi-party systems, the opposition is split into loyalists and radicals. Whilst the latter are always ready to mobilize and capitalize on the exacerbation of social conflicts, the former – who in general possess greater organizational strength – know that they pay a high price if they destabilize the system. In short, the fact that some elites are brought closer to the regime, whereas others are sidelined, means that the various forces of the opposition camp pursue different interests, creating therefore a serious barrier to the development of a cross-ideological coalition (Lust-Okar 2004: 160–161). Secondly, the participation of opposition groups – interested in achieving media visibility, political representation, and access to state resources – in rigged elections fosters suspicion and distrust among the political parties and the rest of society that tends to view the former as a unique block of corrupted politicians.

What has been stated up to now should not lead us to conclude that a tolerated opposition cannot become a double-edged sword for the incumbents, favouring, for instance, alliances between moderate opposition forces and liberal sectors in the dominant coalition (Albrecht 2007: 60–61). Likewise, the formation of a “negative coalition” is not always the direct and predictable product of “an undivided, exclusive political environment”. For sure, this is a necessary condition, yet remains insufficient in itself. As shown by some scholars, in fact, it is the presence of an external threat that is often crucial to heterogeneous political forces overcoming their ideological differences (Van Dyke 2003: 243–244; Clark 2010: 115). Considering the rareness of these circumstances, it should not be surprising that the presence of nearly insurmountable political contrasts among opposition groups is a common and recurrent pattern in many authoritarian regimes. Besides, in the Middle East, where the cooperation among secularists and Islamists “has been hard to negotiate, fickle and short term in nature, and mostly forged for tactical purposes, featuring little agreement on substantive policy areas”, this issue has assumed an even greater relevance (Kraetzschmar 2011: 292). Mutual suspicion, past histories of rivalry and animosity, the fact that Islamists have been treated differently by the regimes, and a widespread fear among secular opposition groups that the Islamists would use their electoral popularity to build an Islamic republic governed by Sharia law has brought many leftists and liberals to tactically swell the ranks of the authoritarian regime. This apparently surprising move was dictated by the attempt to prevent what has been seen by secularists as an even worse scenario – that is, the coming to power of Political Islam (Cavatorta 2009a: 140–143). These mutual antagonisms among challengers, sometimes more willing to fight other opposition forces rather than mobilize against the regime, has been one of the main hindrances to the development of a “negative coalition” and, consequently, an important source of support for those in power who have gained a lot

playing the various opposition forces against each other. Moving “beyond coercion”, autocrats have therefore learned to use the opposition to strengthen their regimes (Zartman 1988: 61–87).

However, from the late 1990s onwards, the situation has changed significantly in the Middle East, with actors across the whole political spectrum having cooperated in unprecedented ways on a wide range of political activities. Besides, cooperation has not been limited only to the formation of electoral blocks – as had been the case in the past – but it has also emerged within professional associations, in the organization of specific protests, and in the establishment of new political groups (Schwedler and Clark 2006: 10–11). Several reasons can account for this. To begin with, the strengthening of authoritarian regimes, the complete – or nearly complete – expulsion of all opposition groups from the institutional game, and the common way in which opponents were treated led the latter to share an important goal – that is, suffered repression. Secondly, because Islamist forces gave reassurances to the secularist camp that their commitment to democracy was not inspired by the motto ‘one person, one vote, one time’, a new attitude towards Political Islam developed in leftist circles. This was based on the view that, given the mass-based support of the Islamists, collaboration with them was tactically crucial to carve out a part of their support (Abdelrahman 2009; 2015: 92–116). Finally, the initial embryotic and limited attempts to collaborate fostered a climate of reciprocal respect and greater understanding among political tendencies that had been at odds for decades, leading to more far-reaching collaborations and bringing about a gradual process of ‘coming together’ in a broad cross-ideological coalition (Hajji 2006: 3–5).

8. The partially autonomous role of the state apparatuses

Liberal pundits and orthodox Marxists disagree on almost everything. A partial and significant exception to this is the shared view that the state is nothing but an arena in which socio-economic conflicts are fought out and resolved. Certainly, whilst for the former the state is the sum of individual wills and the resolution of disputes is consensual and pacific, for the latter the state is the reign of bourgeois domination and ruthless coercion is its predominant feature. Despite this, a strong point of convergence between these two theoretical traditions exists and can be located in the representation of the state as a mere battleground – that is, an empty shell. Once the state is seen in this light, it is logically impossible to raise the mere possibility that conflicts among the social classes and political

forces that compose the ‘historical bloc’, on the one hand, and the state forces, on the other, might develop – something that, however, is theoretically problematic, especially in times of crisis. In this regard, this thesis argues in favour of a conception of the state apparatuses as being partially autonomous from the direct control of the dominant classes. Before pointing out why this is the case, it is worthwhile to start with some clarifications about the state and its role.

As underlined by Ralph Miliband (1969: 54), the first problematic aspect about the state is the fact that it is neither a thing nor a body. On the contrary, the state is first and foremost a system formed and shaped by the relationships among its apparatuses – that is, the government, the administration, the security bodies, the judicial branch, the elected assemblies, and the like. Pointing out as, for instance, Tilly (1978: 52) has that organized coercion is the most prominent and almost unique feature of the state is therefore troublesome. In doing so, in fact, not only are all the other state apparatuses eliminated from the picture, but the state as a system of relations also simply disappears. To be clear: this does not mean that coercive apparatuses are scarcely relevant. On the contrary, and with no surprise, political scientists and revolutionaries alike have always taken a close look at the way in which the men in uniform behave. There are several reasons for this. To begin with, the owners of the means of coercion, and the military in particular, are one of the most coherent and united sections of society – thanks to their spirit of corps, the presence of a rigid hierarchy in their ranks, and the partial self-isolation to which they are forced. Secondly, and even more importantly, once the struggle for power becomes a direct and physical confrontation among various social actors, it is arduous to believe that the military might be defeated, considering its unmatched firepower. These general premises brought Lenin (quoted in Russell 1974: 3) to state that “no revolution of the masses can triumph without the help of a portion of the armed forces that sustained the old regime”. Moreover, it seems that this requirement applies to successful uprisings against authoritarian regimes too (Barany 2011; 2013; Angrist 2013). In short, the role of the men in uniform is always crucial when vast social and political transformations are at stake. Recognising the relevance of the armed forces is not, however, enough to predict whether they will support the regime or back the protesters. For sure, some specific aspects concerning the armed forces themselves – for instance, their internal composition in ethnic terms and the internal rivalries among different parts of the security apparatuses – are important. Moreover, since the military’s behaviour is a response from above to a movement that develops from below, the size, composition, and nature of the latter is often crucial to understanding the former. Recognising the importance of

studying what determines the armed forces' behaviour should not lead us, however, to conclude – as too often is the case – that the state has no other functions but coercion.

The second important element when we discuss the state is the relationship between the capitalist class and the government. Many scholars have highlighted the sharp differences among previous modes of production in which the 'economic elites' were a 'governing class' in the full sense of the term and the apparently contradictory situation in capitalist systems in which the bourgeoisie 'rules without governing'. The astonishing statements advanced in this regard by Joseph Schumpeter (1950: 137–138) and Raymond Aron (1964: 280), who have depicted the businessman as someone completely alien to political affairs, might sound a bit eccentric nowadays, but they are substantially correct to underline an undeniable general feature of capitalism. On the other hand, it is not less true, as powerfully shown by Miliband (1969: 56–59), that the direct and personal engagement of the economic elite in politics has been much greater than supposed. Moreover, it seems that a general tendency towards a greater overlap between the 'political' and 'economic' spheres is under way in many countries. In Egypt, for instance, after the appointment of Ahmed Nazif's cabinet in 2004, six major ministries were headed by businessmen with direct interests in the specific sectors (Farah 2009: 49). Without denying all these aspects, it remains accurate that in capitalist countries economic elites have never constituted more than a relatively small minority of the state elites, which have retained a most markedly middle-class character (Miliband 1969: 60). As far as this thesis is concerned, this is related to the fact that capitalism has economic rather than extra-economic powers of exploitation, bringing the organization of production and the appropriation of surplus value into perfect alignment (Wood 1981: 89–93). It is this integration – completely absent in pre-capitalist formations, where exploitation of human labour was linked to means such as taxes, rents, crops, or labour services, which were not necessarily encapsulated in the production itself – that renders theoretically irrelevant the control of the state for capitalists. In contrast, it was not the same for pre-industrial, aristocratic, and landowning classes that were 'forced' to manage the state and also, from time to time, themselves became the state, to assure their position at the helm of society. Having said that, it would be simply naïve to state that there is a complete separation between the 'economic' and 'political' spheres in capitalism, with businessmen operating in the former and statesmen in the latter. By contrast, the imperative to accumulate imposes an unprecedented command on the labour process, which in turn leads to the necessity for capitalists to rely both on ideological and security apparatuses. In other words, whilst in the past it was the need to grab surplus value that made economic elite want to control the state,

in the present mode of production is the urgency for enhancing exploitation that boosts this process. Thus, it might be concluded that in capitalism there is a privatization of state power without direct control of its main beneficiaries.

Putting herself in the theoretical trend that led to a resurgence of studies dedicated to the state, Theda Skocpol (1979: 24–33) moved a bit further on, switching from the ‘relative autonomy’ theorized by Miliband (1969), Poulantzas (1978), and Therborn (1978) to the “potential [full] autonomy of the state”. She was certainly right in underlining that these scholars had treated the state as a mere aspect related to the prevalent capitalist mode of production, as well as the class composition and struggle. However, Skocpol’s view has opened up two further theoretically relevant problems. To begin with, due to the fact that politics is the world of real rather than hypothetical processes, it should be asked why the “potential full autonomy” has never been translated into “actual full autonomy”. Secondly, although Skocpol’s (1979: 30) interpretation stresses that “state autonomy can only be analysed and explained in terms specific to particular types of socio-political systems and to particular sets of historical circumstances”, it remains extremely vague about the conditions that make a rupture between state rulers and dominant elites more likely. This aspect was tackled by Skocpol herself some years later. In the first chapter of the edited volume *Bringing the State Back In*, Skocpol (1985: 14) points out that state autonomy should not to be considered as a fixed structural feature. Rather, it is contingent since:

not only crises may precipitate the formulation of official strategies and policies by elites or administrators who otherwise might not mobilize their own potential for autonomous action. It is also [...] because the very structural potentials for autonomous state actions change over time.

As agreed by Block (1987: 67), only unique and rare episodes such as economic depressions, mass-based uprisings, wars, and revolutions can cause “a dramatic increase in the state’s role”. Yet, these statements are quite similar to what was theorized by the group of scholars who advanced the idea of the state being partially autonomous. In this regard, Therborn’s (1978: 181) own words are particularly significant:

Generally speaking, the greater the internal divisions of the ruling class, the sharper are the problems of representation, and the more pronounced is the specific irreducibility or ‘relative autonomy’ of the state. Similarly, the problems

of mediation and ‘autonomy’ of the state vary accordingly with the strength of the ruled classes.

In conclusion, while it is true that Skocpol’s “potential autonomy of the state” is feasible, this is something that has never developed in full isolation from other social and political processes. Besides, it has been partially retreated on the theoretical level by Skocpol herself. Therefore, calling for moderation, this thesis supports the view that the state apparatuses are relatively autonomous. Relative should be understood here not only as contingent to the development of a phase of exceptional politics – that is, when the institutionalized procedures for resolving conflicts breaks down either because of an internal revolt or an external threat, creating therefore the space for state intervention – but also related to the state’s own interests, which, if not necessarily equivalent to the interests of the dominant class, have never equalled the interests of the ‘revolutionaries’ in the full sense of the term.

9. Why Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia?

A bitter dialectic has traditionally characterized the academic debate between area studies and the disciplinary social science (Tessler, Nachtwey and Banda 1999). The former has been accused of lacking rigor and having limited interest in parsimony and generalization, whilst the latter has been charged with oversimplification and insufficient connection to the real world. Actually, avoiding sterile and stereotypical representations, social science theory and area studies should not be regarded as being in competition. On the contrary, as shown by the fact that area studies have often produced broadly generalizable theoretical insights, these two traditions can benefit immensely from each other’s contributions. Obviously, this is a study rooted in a specific world region and the *Most Similar System Design* (MSSD) might appear at first glance as the most appropriate means to select countries. When employing this research technique social scientists select cases that are as similar as possible, except with regard to the phenomenon studied. This requirement, aiming at keeping constant all relevant variables, is generally met by including countries that are geographically and culturally close to each other. This is the reason why, for instance, Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries are seen as good samples, sharing many economic, cultural, and political characteristics that, in turn, makes it possible to restrict the still larger field of “experimental” or explanatory variables (Przeworski and Teune 1970: 32). Despite this, given the internal complexity and

limited number of countries, there will always be more than just one difference between the two – or more – countries selected, meaning that MSSD will necessarily “overdetermine” the dependent phenomenon (*Ibid*: 34). This intrinsic weakness of the MSSD is exacerbated in those area studies that deal with an array of countries that share a particular limited number of features.

Arguably, the Middle East, being one of the least coherent and homogeneous areas of the world, represents an extraordinary case in point here (Achcar 2013: 35). In Giacomo Luciani’s (1995: 212) own words, “this is a land of extremes”. Countries in the region range from having disturbing opulence to painful poverty and from apparently end-less hydrocarbon resources to complete scarcity. Again, quasi-feudal system of overlapping dynastic and religious authorities coexist with modern and developed forms of authoritarianism, and the extreme ethnic homogeneity of some polities is counter-balanced by old and new tribal divisions in others. All in all, the attempt to propose generalizations about the whole Middle East appears complicated and largely useless, while a study conducted through the MSSD parameters in this geographical area is simply untenable. Likewise, the alternative strategy of choosing units of research that are as different as possible with regard to the explanatory variables – that is, selecting on the dependent variable – also cannot be adopted. This technique, introduced by Przeworski and Teune (1970: 34–39), was labelled by the two authors the *Most Different System Design* (MDSD). They thought its applicability was restricted to the sub-systemic level, imagining that the required homogeneity of the population is obtained only by observing variables *within* the system. This strong statement has subsequently been challenged by some influential works – first and foremost, Skocpol’s (1979) masterpiece on social revolutions. Yet, given that this study is not simply interested in examining the breakdown of authoritarian regimes, but also in assessing their capacity to survive, another technique to select cases has to be found.

Case selection in this thesis is driven by four criteria. To begin with, there is an intellectual interest in dealing with the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings and their effects on the institutional stability of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. That is, the phenomenon taken into consideration is – by its own nature – geographically restricted and temporally bounded. Secondly, the already mentioned heterogeneity present in this world region makes it advisable to question the appropriateness of considering the Middle East as a unique area study. Restricting scholarly attention to sub-regional units – North Africa in this case – is a good starting point to avoid an excess of dis-homogeneity in the countries analysed. This is not to say that North Africa is without contrasts, let alone a completely homogenous area.

Nevertheless, by concentrating on this sub-regional unit the differences are softened. Thirdly, this thesis does not analyse in depth all the countries in North Africa. Nor does it examine a random sample among them. Comparative historical analysis works well with a set of a few cases that share some specific features. As is known, authors of quantitative studies based on the norms of regression analysis have often criticized non-random selections that do not deal with the entire universe of possible cases. According to this methodological tradition, the decision to restrict attention to extreme cases ‘truncates’ the dependent variable, leaving studies vulnerable to errors that are systematic and potentially devastating (Geddes 1990: 131; King, Keohane and Verba [KKV] 1994: 130). Nevertheless, even the attempt to universalize the rules that are valid in the context of ordinary least square (OLS) analysis has not gone without its critics. As has been stated, working with a small number of cases, random selection and statistical corrections for selection bias create more problems than they solve (Dion 1998: 127; Collier, Mahoney and Seawright 2004: 87; Seawright and Gerring 2008: 295). This is because in qualitative studies causality is built around necessary and sufficient causes, rather than correlations among hypothesized causes and effects. Representing two alternative cultures, qualitative and quantitative researches have distinct views about the best strategies to select cases (Goertz and Mahoney 2012: 1).

Fourth and finally, the concept of “sufficient similarity”, which entails choosing cases that can be meaningfully compared, is introduced and applied (Pierson and Skocpol 2002). Sufficient similarities are not definable in fixed and abstract terms, but derive from the specific theoretical framework adopted. As noted by Ragin (1992), it is all about ‘casing’ here – that is, defining the topic, pointing out the outcome, providing preliminary hypotheses, and selecting a population set that offers relevant information vis-à-vis the general framework adopted. This means that cases that from another point of view may appear to be quite dissimilar can be selected. However, since a similar perspective, especially when not taken seriously, can be used to justify nearly every type of selection, stronger reasons are needed to explain not only why Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia have been chosen, but also why all three have been grouped together as sufficiently similar cases. Particularly since many scholars would argue that these three countries share more differences than common features. Ben Ali’s Tunisia has often been described as an absolute dictatorship with no space at all for political opposition groups, characterized by an oppressive and very effectively performing police system, by numerically small and professionalized armed forces, and by the concentration of economic and political power in the presidential palace. Algeria, in contrast, has been described as having a rentier and clan-based system in which the military, and in

particular the secret services, have had an unquestionable hegemony, although recurrent and partially free elections have provided a farcical smell of electoral democracy. Finally, Egypt has been put somewhere in between. The military has been a backbone of the system, but their power declined in favour of the Ministry of the Interior in the last decades; the extent to which there has been political openings has fluctuated up and down, never matching, however, the two 'extremes' of Tunisia and Algeria; and the concentration of power in Gamal Mubarak's restricted clique of tycoons grew sharply in the last years before the uprising, but other centres of power remained to in some ways counterbalance the president's son's ambitions. Seen in this light, it is not surprising that some analysts have grouped Egypt with Algeria, whilst others have grouped Egypt with Tunisia, but no one has argued that it belongs together with both. In particular, the differences between Tunisia and Algeria have been seen as too relevant to conceive possible a comparison.

However, this thesis argues that Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia exhibit important similarities with respect to their historical formation and in many stages of their development. These similarities make it possible to treat all three countries together. Moreover, the different path followed by Algeria since the late 1980s provides an interesting contrasting case to the causal explanation developed to give an account of the breakdown of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. All three countries experienced colonial domination that literally disrupted the still pre-capitalist social formations, integrated these states into the capitalist sphere, as well as transformed them into commodity-extracting hinterlands for the centre and importers of manufactured consumer goods³⁰. In other words, an internal process of industrialization was strictly prevented. The achievement of independence was combined with the establishment of republican regimes, which could not build their legitimacy on traditional and religious elements as, for instance, the monarchy in Morocco and Libya did, or at least tried to do. Furthermore, whereas many states that had been newly created by European countries in the Mashreq suffered from the presence of loyalties that were directed towards networks and communities other than the state, no North African country, except Libya, has ever had to deal with a majority of citizens expressing doubts or mental reservations regarding the political community to which they belong (Rustow 1970: 350; Anderson 1986: 181–221).

³⁰ Needless to say, France's disruptive role in Algeria was unmatched by any other colonial power in the Middle East. In Egypt, for instance, the British presence was much more discreet, but eventually it led to rather similar consequences in terms of social fabric.

As underlined by many scholars, the paths and the nationalist coalitions that brought Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia to independence could not have been more dissimilar (Willis 2014: 9–35). Despite this, while Morocco and Libya got stuck in the protection of the existing patronage system, the three countries adopted ‘modernizing’ projects and import substitution industrialization (ISI) policies. The ISI strategy rapidly led to a balance-of-payments crisis, forcing the three countries to roll back some of the previous reforms. However, the new phase was not characterized by export-oriented policies, but rather by an ambiguous combination of partial economic liberalization and the state assuming an increasingly crucial role as the main employer and facilitator of private profit-making initiatives. This was possible thanks to external rents. The downturn that hit these sources of wealth in the mid-1980s, the burden of external debts, and the looming of new international scenarios put pressure on the three countries to sign structural adjustment plans with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB). Egypt and Tunisia therefore embraced neo-liberal policies, whilst Algeria, thanks to the recovery of hydrocarbon prices in the late 1990s, followed a different path. In conclusion, considering that this thesis focuses on macro political changes and considers structural variables crucial, Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia seem to show sufficient similarities in their historical development to be fruitfully compared and contrasted.

PART II:

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

Chapter 3

TUNISIA: THE FOUR WEEKS THAT

SHOOK THE ARAB WORLD

1. The uprising

1.1 Much more than just a suicide

On March 3, 2010, after his fruit cart had been confiscated by the police and his demand to meet with the city mayor had been rejected, a young Tunisian set himself on fire. As suggested by the date, the man was not Mohamed Bouazizi, who just a few months later would become a global icon in the struggle against dictatorship. Moreover, the tragic event did not take place in any of the several marginalized internal areas of Tunisia, but in the rather affluent Monastir, on the north-eastern coast of the country (Gana 2013: 12). Abdessalem Trimech's self-immolation, as well as a dozen such acts that occurred in many small towns and large villages throughout the country in 2010 alone, did not trigger popular protests, let alone an uprising (Saidani 2012: 45). This shows us two things. First, Bouazizi's desperate decision in the last weeks of 2010 was by no means the first act of self-immolation. Second, and unlike other similar acts, thanks to the combination of several structural and random factors it became inspiring and empowering for tens of thousands of marginalized Tunisians across the country.

The events are fairly well known. On December 16, 2010, a 26-year-old fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, who was working without the required permits, was stopped by a policewoman (which evidently made the perceived offence much greater) and his goods were confiscated (Ayeb 2011: 474). The following day, the young man went to the governor's office to complain about the rude police behaviour and to recover his cart. Yet, the governor's persistent refusal to meet him and the consequent inability of the young man to regain possession of his goods angered Bouazizi, whose working activity was crucial for supporting his whole family (Piot 2011: 65). A frustrated and humiliated Bouazizi therefore bought a can of petrol and set himself ablaze in front of the municipal headquarters of Sidi Bouzid (Gana 2013: 10).

Many scholars and observers have suggested that it is important to interpret Bouazizi's open act of self-immolation in a public space and in front of an administrative building as a political message rather than as a 'mere' suicide (Mabrouk 2011: 629; Saidani 2012: 45; Gana 2013: 11). However, this aspect should not be overemphasized. After all, the aforementioned act by Trimech was carried out inside the city hall in Monastir and not in a private house. If Bouazizi's self-immolation literally became the spark that ignited the whole country, this was because long-term elements (for instance, the neoliberal economic restructuring, the

concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands, and the narrowing of the basis of the regime) combined in an almost unique way with three other short-term factors. To begin with, as brilliantly underlined by Gelvin (2012: 25), several scholars have completely failed to take into consideration the human element “that determines whether an uprising will or will not occur”. It was the way in which people’s sense of deprivation towards deep socio-economic grievances suddenly changed in the unfolding of the protests themselves from apparent passive resignation to indignation and then political activism that triggered an unpredictable uprising (Angrist 2013: 548). Secondly, the geographical location in which Bouazizi’s act took place was certainly pivotal. In the aftermath of Ben Ali’s fall, the Tunisian uprising was often described as the “Jasmine Revolution”, in a clear reference to the flower that grows in the north of the country, but that is quite rare in its internal and more arid regions. However, as highlighted by Ayeb (2011: 270), looking at the chronology of the uprising and at some of its key moments, it would be much more accurate to talk about an alfalfa grass uprising – in reference to the typical shrub of the south. It was in the marginalized, poor, and dependent Tunisia of the south, the centre, and the west that the soul of the uprising could be found. Sidi Bouzid, in particular, is the regional capital of one of those mid-western governorates in which all major social and economic indicators were much worse than in the relatively affluent north-east. This unbalanced and unequal development between the capital Tunis, the big cities of the Sahel, such as Sousse and Monastir, and tourist zones, including Djerba and Hammamet, on the one hand, and the rest of the country, on the other, is a long-lasting and difficult-to-overcome legacy. It is the product of both the French colonization and of the geographical strictly bounded movement of liberation led by Habib Bourguiba, who, like many other Tunisian nationalists, was a French-educated middle-class man from the north (Perkins 2014: 95). However, after the reopening to private capital in the 1970s and even more after the so-called ‘medical coup’ staged by Ben Ali in 1987³¹, which led to a scarcely transparent process of economic liberalization and privatization, the gap between developed Tunisia and what can be described – relying on a ‘Moroccan terminology’ – as *la Tunisie inutile* became much greater. It was in the latter that the bulk of Tunisians suffered from socio-economic marginalization and underemployment, and were often forced to emigrate to tourist resorts and to the large cities of the north. It was in the less developed Tunisia that the unprecedented six-month-long popular revolt in the Gafsa mining region in 2008 took place (see section 4 in this chapter for a detailed description of the events). It was in some of the

³¹ Ben Ali’s coup is often defined as ‘medical’ due to the fact that it was justified by reference to Bourguiba’s failing health and to Article 57 of the country’s constitution.

most marginalized areas of the country, and specifically in Sidi Bouzid, Menzel Bouzaiane, and at the port of Skhira, that unemployed graduates and youth repeatedly protested throughout 2010 (Beinin 2016: 97). Thirdly and finally, the attempted suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi was immediately exploited by four separate social entities, which, by mobilizing their own human and social resources, were able to demystify the campaign put in place by pro-regime supporters, who represented the tragic event as an isolated and private act. The first group consisted of family members, neighbours, and friends, who, sharing emotional and similar socio-economic grievances, immediately staged completely spontaneous and unplanned gatherings in front of public buildings (Mabrouk 2011: 631). They were rapidly joined in the protests by the unemployed, precariously employed workers, and students. These sectors of disgruntled and marginalized Tunisians emerged as the real engine of the protests, physically challenging the security forces and resisting their assaults (Piot 2011: 55). With the partial exception of the feeble organizational support provided by the UDC (*Union des Diplômés Chômeurs*), even this second group acted in a spontaneous and uncoordinated way. Had these initial protests failed to attract other social groups, it is extremely likely that they would have remained ephemeral and scarcely known outbursts of rage. It was the social and logistical support provided by two other entities that transformed the initial gatherings into an uprising. Militant local union members of the UGTT (*Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*), who were often at the same time activists in extreme-left unrecognized parties – first and foremost, the PCOT (*Parti Communiste des Ouvriers de Tunisie*) – represented the group that played the most crucial role in the initial stages of the uprising. They deliberately promoted an adapted version of Bouazizi's story, presenting the young man as an unemployed university graduate. This was a clear attempt to mobilize this numerically and politically relevant social group (Gana 2013: 10). Even more importantly, as confirmed by the account of a trade union member in Sidi Bouzid quoted in Yousfi (2015: 65), the day after Bouazizi's self-immolation a committee of support for the ongoing mobilization was established by radical union members, many of whom were teachers in elementary or secondary schools, as well as health and postal workers. The local union cells were not only able to provide quite an efficient organizational structure, securing the movement's sustainability over time, but they also acted as a mediating power between radical but politically immature youth and the security forces (Zemni 2013: 130). Furthermore, in the first days of the uprising, the UGTT's headquarters became the *maljaâ* (shelter) for the protest movement, being the pivotal point around which union members, human rights activists, political opponents, and the youth converged (Yousfi 2015: 60-63). The fourth and last group was formed by lawyers, a

professional category that had already emerged as one of the strongholds of the opposition to Ben Ali's rules throughout the 2000s (Gobe 2010b: 338-342). The process of gradual and significant radicalization experienced by lawyers, many of whom had been engaged in legally supporting the best-known figures of the 2008 radical movement in the Gafsa basin against repression, meant that they immediately redefined the emotional rage spread by Bouazizi's suicide in legal terms (Mabrouk 2011: 632). It should be noted, for instance, that the first lawyers' sit-in in Sidi Bouzid's municipal courthouse took place as early as December 18 (Beinin 2016: 102).

From what has been stated so far, it has already emerged clearly that the spontaneous and leaderless protest movement (aspects that have been constantly underlined in the literature) immediately found some crucial organizational support, which allowed it to expand geographically and socially. In particular, by day two or three of the uprising, the core of that opposition coalition, which was to become fatal to Ben Ali, had already emerged. It comprised the young and scarcely conscious 'lumpenproletariat' of the marginal areas of the country; radical white-collar state workers, who were members of the local union cells and had a long-lasting political militancy; and a politicized middle-class professional group – the lawyers. The implicit emergence of this cross-class coalition was crucial to the unfolding and diffusion of the Tunisian uprising. Moreover, within the aforementioned social classes, a broad spectrum of ideological traditions was represented. In particular, whilst the local UGTT cells were almost entirely *gauchiste*, with their almost infinite political factions, in the ranks of lawyers, liberals, nationalists, leftists, and Islamists were present and, what is even more significant, they had learned to join forces against the common enemy in previous years.

However, as long as industrial workers, middle-class sectors other than lawyers, and capitalists from partially disadvantaged areas did not join the fray, the likelihood of the uprising being successful remained modest. It was the late entry of these three social groups that tilted the relationship between the regime and its challengers, eventually determining the defeat of Ben Ali's regime. Yet, this only happened on January 12, 25 days after Bouazizi's self-immolation.

1.2 The geographical diffusion of the protest movement

Demonstrations in Sidi Bouzid continued regularly every day, turning into riots at night. There were political slogans against high prices and unemployment, while the most popular

chant became ‘work is a right, you band of thieves’, in a clear reference to Ben Ali and his wife’s families (Ayebe 2011: 474). Protests spread quickly to other small towns and local villages in the governorate of Sidi Bouzid, such as Menzel Bouzaiane, Regueb, Meknassi, Jelma, and Ben Oun (Beinin 2016: 101). In this development, a key role was played by the local and regional sections of the UGTT that “*pour alléger la pression*” of the security forces on Sidi Bouzid tried to enlarge the geographical boundaries of the protest (Yousfi 2015: 69). This behaviour was partially an attempt to avoid the mistakes committed during the 2008 revolt in the Gafsa region and partially an effort to regain legitimacy after the UGTT’s management of the crisis had been sharply criticized by rank-and-file members.

On December 22, 22-year-old Houcine Falhi committed suicide by electrocuting himself, fuelling even more the ongoing wave of demonstrations, marches, and riots in Tunisian mid-western towns (Beinin 2016: 101). The spread of the movement and its radical character alarmed the regime, which increasingly replied with bloody repression. On December 24, the very heavy-handed police response led to the murder of two young men, who were shot dead by the security forces, and to tens of people being injured in Menzel Bouzaiane, a small town of about 5000 inhabitants (Saidani 2012: 46). In the following days, UGTT-sponsored meetings were stormed by the security forces in several internal towns and denouncements of the brutality of the regime were made public by legal and illegal political forces, lawyers, and almost all levels of the union (Beinin 2016: 102).

On December 27, for the first time, the protest movement reached Tunis (Murphy 2011: 300). To be precise, a first gathering in Mohamed Ali Hammi Square – that is, in the capital’s *place* dedicated to the ‘father’ of the Tunisian unionism – had already been organized by an opposition minority within the UGTT (*Rencontre Syndicale Démocratique*) two days before, attracting a few hundred protesters (Yousfi 2015: 70). Yet, on December 27, a qualitatively new element emerged. The mobilization of the UGTT’s local sections affected some regional bureaus and those national federations with a militant and left-leaning tradition, which under increasingly high pressure from below were ‘forced’ – risking otherwise losing even their last vestiges of credibility – to break the rigid hierarchical chain of command of the union. For the first time since the beginning of the protest, the UGTT regional section of the capital called a gathering in Mohammed Ali Hammi Square. About a thousand people attended it, whereas in Sousse and Sfax just a few hundred joined the sit-ins (*Al Jazeera*, December 28, 2010). The reaction of the UGTT leadership was furious, condemning the anti-Ben Ali slogans being chanted and denouncing publicly the national leader of the secondary school union for having attended the gathering (Yousfi 2015: 70).

The following day, while a large lawyers' sit-in in Tunis was broken up and two of the most prominent figures of the protest were arrested (from the Bar Association, which in response called for nationwide demonstrations on December 31), Ben Ali made his first national television broadcast in which he declared that the protests were unacceptable and that guilty people would be severely punished (Murphy 2011: 301). At the same time, he tried to appease protesters with the sacking of the regional governors of Sidi Bouzid, Jendouba, and Zaghuan, and then of the Minister of Communications.

On December 31, the planned protests by lawyers took place in cities such as Tunis, Sousse, Monastir, Jendouba, and Gafsa, and were once again severely repressed by the security forces (Zemni 2013: 131). According to Mokhtar Trifi, President of the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH, the French initialism), lawyers were "savagely beaten" throughout the country (*Al Jazeera*, December 31, 2010). In reaction to the state's behaviour, the Bar Association announced a general strike on January 6, which was supported by a variously estimated 50 to 95 per cent of the roughly 8,000 Tunisian lawyers (Beinin 2016: 103), whereas the day before the national federation of secondary school teachers had struck for 20 minutes in the schools in support of the ongoing agitations (Angrist 2013: 560).

By the end of the second week of protests, the movement had spread geographically to nearly the whole country, moving to Kef in the north-west, Kairouan – the 'religious capital' of Tunisia – in the centre, and Kebili, Tozeur, and Ben Guerdane in the south (Saidani 2012: 47). The social composition of the implicit opposition coalition was still the same: disenfranchised and radical youth (who were largely precarious workers, unemployed *tout court*, and secondary students), militant white-collar workers, engaged in the UGTT's local cells, and lawyers. Moreover, the beating heart of the protest movement gradually moved away from the governorate of Sidi Bouzid (where, however, protests and marches continued on a daily base) to the region of Kasserine. As early as January 3, in fact, peaceful demonstrations, violently repressed by the police, took place in Thala, a small town not far from Kasserine, whilst the announcement that Mohamed Bouazizi had eventually passed away and the savage behaviour of the police strengthened the spiral of violent confrontation between the regime and its opponents. Between January 8 and 10, the city of Kasserine and the small towns of Thala and Regueb became the main theatres of confrontation, with as many as 50 protesters killed by the security forces, which also relied on live ammunitions and snipers to halt the assault on state symbols of power, such as police stations and buildings of the ruling party (Piot 2011: 72; Beinin 2016: 103). The use of indiscriminate violence by the security forces was a direct

consequence of their inability to address a mass-based uprising. Although the Ministry of the Interior had gradually become in Bel Ali's period a powerful and hypertrophic institution, with no less than 130,000 effectives (a substantial number in a country of ten and a half million people), many of them were recruited from among the lower echelons of society, and were generally poorly paid, trained, and managed (Brooks 2013: 218). Even more importantly, police officers were used to crush protests and sit-ins thanks to the mere force of numbers, panicking and resorting to indiscriminate use of force when they suddenly discovered that they were outnumbered by the protesters. The inability of the security forces to restore order meant that the regime had to rely on the armed forces, a numerically modest (around 35,000 men) institution with a long-lasting history of no involvement in political and economic matters. Despite this, the deployment of the Tunisian army has not been as rare a scenario as is generally assumed. After all, the general strike of 1978, the January 1984 bread riots, and (at least partially) the 2008 revolt in the Gafsa region were all events that proved the inability of the internal security forces to contain popular protests and maintain the loyalty of the armed forces to the regime.

There is no agreement among scholars on the precise moment at which Ben Ali ordered the deployment of the army onto the streets. According to Piot (2011: 148), as early as January 6, the military made its first appearance in the troublesome area of Kasserine, whilst Nassif (2015: 80) stated that the armed forces joined the police on the streets the following day. In contrast, Brooks (2013: 215) and Pachon (2014: 516) suggest that the military was deployed a couple of days later, with the latter scholar underlining that the Ministries of the Interior and Defence 'only' started to work together to suppress the uprising on January 9. Whatever the exact date was on which the military left its barracks, it is evident that for days the armed forces' behaviour remained ambiguous, and certainly not supportive of the uprising. On some, albeit rare, occasions, soldiers interposed themselves between the protesters and the police, and were therefore welcomed as liberators by the former (Brooks 2013: 215). More often, however, the military's intervention was 'defensive', aimed at protecting embassies and ministry buildings, as well as the streets of the main cities when no other state institution would have been able to do so (Nassif 2015: 80). In no way should this be considered an implicit, let alone explicit, form of protection for the protesters, who were harassed and physically assaulted by the police forces while "the military was sitting on the fence" (Brooks 2013: 215). It was the shift in the balance of force between the protesters and the regime – in turn, a consequence of the social enlargement of the uprising to other crucial social classes from January 12 onwards – that forced the military to abandon its apparently neutral, but

substantially pro-regime, position. Disobeying Ben Ali's command to restore order, the armed forces eventually determined the fall of his regime.

1.3 The late entry of other social classes and the defeat of Ben Ali's regime

On January 9, Ben Ali appeared for a second time on national television, promising to create 300,000 new jobs, but also comparing the revolt to an internationally planned act led by al-Qaeda to destabilize the country. According to Zemni (2013: 131), the inability of the government to provide any real solution to the crisis and its stubbornness in representing challengers as mere puppets operated by terrorist groups or Western powers "pushed the protest movement into a direct and total confrontation with Ben Ali's regime".

The following day the protests reached Greater Tunis through neighbourhoods such as Ettadhamen, Intilaka, and Ibn Khaldoun, where most of the inhabitants were internal emigrants of modest means (Ayeub 2011: 474). In these districts the police came under attack from unemployed youth, leading to the outbreak of violent confrontations between protesters and the security forces (Saidani 2012: 50). At the same time, in Hammamet a group of young Tunisians climbed onto a billboard with a gigantic figure of Ben Ali and ripped the effigy of the dictator down, with the video of the event going viral on social media, inspiring others in the following days to dismantle symbols of Ben Ali's cult of personality throughout the country (Chomiak 2013). On January 11, other neighbourhoods in Tunis, such as Zahrouni and Sidi Hessein, joined the movement, which had assumed an undisputable nationwide character. Yet, whether the uprising was to be successful or not remained highly questionable. Actually, had the movement failed to attract other economically and socially crucial groups, it seems more likely that Ben Ali would have been able to somehow weather the storm. An apparently innocuous decision taken by the National Administrative Committee of the UGTT on January 11 provided the key organizational and logistical support for the late entry of new social classes, eventually tilting the balance of power in favour of the protesters.

After the regime's violent repression of the protests in Kasserine and the humiliating televised speech given by Ben Ali, the executive committee of the UGTT was forced to embrace a much more adversarial stance than it had done before. Asking for the release of those people who had been jailed was no longer enough to maintain the internal cohesion of the organization, to avoid splits, and to preserve some kind of credibility within Tunisian society. By making public a document in which the regime's apparatuses, but not the regime

explicitly, were criticized, the National Administrative Committee of the union recognized the right of its local and regional sections to organize peaceful protests and strikes (Yousfi 2015: 73). This decision also has to be understood as an internal compromise between the militant local cells, which asked for a national general strike, and the central bureau, which remained close and loyal to the regime as eloquently shown by the words pronounced by the UGTT secretary general, Abdesslem Jerad, upon leaving a meeting with Ben Ali on January 12: “I have found that the President of the Republic possesses a profound understanding of the principal problems and their causes” (quoted in Beinun 2016: 105). Nevertheless, the attempt by the UGTT leadership to balance the two centrifugal forces within its organization failed miserably. The right granted to regional bodies to organize strikes became, in fact, an unexpected and crucial springboard for the protest movement. On January 12, three regional sections (Kairouan, Sfax, and Tozeur) of the UGTT called for a general strike over their territories. Arguably, this was the key turning point in the success of the uprising. In particular, what happened in Sfax became an extraordinary trigger of Ben Ali’s fall. There are at least four main reasons for this.

To begin with, as already emphasized at length, the Tunisian uprising was characterized in its early phases by a cross-class alliance between marginalized sectors of the scarcely developed regions, politically radical white-collar workers, and middle-class lawyers. When the protests spread from the governorate of Sidi Bouzid to neighbouring regions, eventually reaching the outskirts of the capital on January 9, the social composition of the opposition coalition was not altered in any way. In other words, whilst the uprising spread geographically, it failed to do the same in social group terms. It is certainly true that industrial workers joined the protests as mere individuals on some specific occasions. Yet, as long as the circuit of hierarchical decision-making within the UGTT was not broken by the decision taken by its Administrative Committee on January 11, a framework for a common action of workers did not develop (Yousfi 2015: 85). The strike in Sfax, as well as those in Kairouan and Tozeur, therefore marked the first action of workers as a collective body. However, and this brings us to the second element, the specific weight of Sfax was incomparably greater than that of the other two regions. On the eve of the uprising in the governorate of Sfax there was the highest concentration of manufacturing (especially agrofood, chemical, and electrical firms) of the whole country (Ayadi and Matoussi 2014: 7-11). This underlines the crucial role of this region in the Tunisian economy and the disruptive potential of a general strike here.

Thirdly, according to union estimates, the strike brought more than 30,000 people onto the streets, and it was also backed by middle-class sectors and local businessmen, who were fed

up with their marginalization in comparison to the capitalists of Sousse and Monastir (Zemni 2013: 131). In other words, not only did industrial workers make their first real appearance in the uprising, but also middle classes other than lawyers and owners of enterprises who had been penalized by an economic development merely concentrated on the north-eastern coast joined the fray. In short, a cross-class coalition in which nearly all sectors of society were present took real and concrete form in this geographical context for the first time. Fourthly, what happened in Sfax, as well as in the two other regions in which general strikes were carried out, profoundly affected the subsequent behaviour of protesters and the regime's apparatuses as well (Brooks 2013: 218). In Sfax, the slogan that was to become the rallying cry of the Arab uprisings throughout the Middle East – 'the people want to topple the regime' – was heard for the first time, showing that the revolt had already become an unmediated confrontation between protesters and the regime. The following day, in the wake of the events in Sfax, demonstrations in Kasserine, Monastir, and Sousse repeated the same slogan, while people from both popular and middle-class neighbourhoods all converged on the Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis (Zemni 2013: 131). At the same time, a demonstration organized in front of the national UGTT union office in Tunis was harshly broken up by the police forces, who came under attack from protesters in several parts of the country, often being forced to abandon their position (Ayebe 2011: 475). In a rather symbolic episode, which took place in Hammamet, police fled in the face of demonstrators, who ransacked the mansion of one of Ben Ali's relatives (Brooks 2013: 218). In this chaotic and revolutionary situation, whilst Ben Ali addressed the nation for the third time in just a few weeks, speaking in the Tunisian dialect and promising jobs, food, free Internet access, democratic rules, and whatever else people seemed to demand, the UGTT leadership sent conflicting messages to its lower levels. In his desperate attempt to balance the need to back the radical stances supported by the union members and not to enter into a direct conflict with the regime (which no one – it has to be remembered – expected to break down the following day), General Secretary Jerad launched the paradoxical rallying cry of 'strike at home' (Netterstrøm 2016: 394).

However, the social forces, activated by the unfolding and development of the events, were already too strong to be kept under control by the televised speech of an untrustworthy President or by the ambiguous stances of a scarcely legitimate union secretary. Throughout the country, the police were physically defeated by protesters and replaced by the army, which limited itself to protecting the vital crossroads and institutional buildings, particularly reinforcing security around the Ministry of the Interior. It appears to be true that Ben Ali asked the army chief of staff, General Rachid Ammar, to restore order, whilst the initial

hypothesis that he ordered the army to fire on protesters has been disconfirmed by subsequent and more informed accounts of the events (Pachon 2014: 515-516; Nassif 2015: 77). Yet, the distinction is more formal than real, given the ongoing situation on the ground. After all, in addressing a mass-based uprising, the use of repression and resultant casualties are simply unavoidable.

On January 14, a moderate two-hour regional strike in Greater Tunis was called by the local UGTT. As planned, there was an initial gathering in the square dedicated to Mohamed Ali Hammi. Yet, radical developments followed immediately, and the expected moderate sit-in became a great and radical protest that spread throughout the central Avenue Habib Bourguiba. Workers, urban middle classes, and the youth of peripheral and poor districts marched together using the slogan ‘Ben Ali *dégage*’. By noon, the two-hour strike in Greater Tunis had united the whole country in its desire for change and the uprising “had taken on an expensive cross-class character” (Brooks 2013: 217). Had Ammar commanded his troops to restore order, it is likely that he would have dealt with a mutiny of mid-ranking and junior officers, unwilling to repress the Tunisian *people* who seemed to march as a unique body (Nassif 2015: 78-79). By endangering the stability of the armed forces as an institution, the uprising was able to trigger a rupture in the oligarchy of power (Zemni 2013: 132). Members of a pro-Ben Ali rally in Tunis organized by the general secretary of the ruling party, Mohamed Ghariani, defected and joined the anti-regime demonstrations (Angrist 2013: 553). Similarly, a few elite units of the internal security forces, often regarded as indisputably loyal to Ben Ali, abandoned the Palace (Pachon 2014: 518-521). The neutrality of the armed forces no longer amounted to a passive position, but became an indirect support for the protesters. By 4 o’clock in the afternoon, Ben Ali and his family had already fled to Saudi Arabia. Probably, in Ben Ali’s mind this should have been a temporary withdrawal. It became de facto the last act as President of one of the most hated and cruel dictators in present times.

2. The political economy of Tunisia’s uprising

2.1 From independence to *dirigisme*

Unlike Algerian independence, the process of decolonization in Tunisia was quite smooth and peaceful. This was not only an effect of the less relevant economic and political penetration of the French into the country, which had been transformed into a protectorate in 1881 largely as

a defensive measure against the suspected expansionist intentions of other European powers – first and foremost, Italy – but also a product of the middle-class character and liberal-oriented political view of the movement for independence in Tunisia (Willis 2014: 25). The anti-colonial struggle was centred around the *Neo-Destour*, a party founded in 1934 that was an offshoot of the *Destour* (meaning ‘constitution’ in Arabic), which had been established in 1920 by members of the traditional Mamluk elite who found themselves excluded from any position of effective power (Anderson 1986: 165). Although the *Neo-Destour* too was composed of well-educated young men, they did not come only from the *grandes familles* of Tunis, but from the whole of Sahel. Most of them obtained a university education in France and then returned to Tunisia as lawyers, doctors, and other professionals (Murphy 1999: 45). To a large extent, Bourguiba was the quintessence of these young men, who chose a gradualist and conciliatory approach in the struggle for independence, constantly vowing that European private properties would be safeguarded in post-colonial Tunisia (Moore 1965: 42)³². All these elements, combined with the French decision to concentrate its efforts on maintaining its domination over Algeria, explain why, although political violence was not completely absent in the Tunisian nationalist struggle, the final stages were negotiated rather than won at the point of a gun. In July 1954 France’s willingness to grant Tunisia internal autonomy was announced and in September 1955 the first all-Tunisian cabinet took office. On March 20, 1956, Tunisia was formally recognized as independent.

After having consolidated his power, transformed the country into a republic, and been elected as head of the state and head of the government, Bourguiba turned Tunisia into a “presidential monarchy” (*Ibid.*: 71-104). Although a single-party regime was established, with the *Parti Communiste Tunisien* (PCT) – that is, the main opposition force – eventually banned in 1963, the role of the *Neo-Destour* always remained subordinate to that of the state, reversing the relationship between the state and the party present in the countries of the Eastern Bloc. The party was rapidly transformed into an instrument of the government and never became the ruling apparatus, whilst the attempt to transform the UGTT into a regime’s crutch was unsuccessful, with the union always maintaining some degree of autonomy. It is

³² The conciliatory stances taken by Bourguiba were challenged by Salah Ben Youssef, who had assumed the leadership of the party during Bourguiba’s long period abroad. Youssef and his followers supported a pan-Arab nationalism and wanted to adopt a more militant strategy. Moreover, Bourguiba and Youssef were supported by two different constituencies. Whilst the former was championed by an alliance between labour and middle-class sectors of the north-eastern coast, the latter enjoyed the support of religious leaders, and commercial and landed classes, especially in the south of the country, and of those people with pan-Arab sentiments (Alexander C. 2010: 33).

interesting to note that the subordination of the ruling party to the president's will – although in a quite moderate form in comparison to Ben Ali's period – and the relative independence of the UGTT would become constant elements of the Tunisian political environment until the 2010 popular uprising, showing the long-lasting legacy of state formation (Hinnebusch 2015b).

In the economic field, Bourguiba pursued a liberal development strategy. The government provided a capital-friendly environment, granting tax holidays for new enterprises, large investments in infrastructure, and protective tariffs. Despite these measures, the Tunisian economy had deteriorated significantly by the late 1950s. This was mainly an effect of the colonial period, when Tunisia had been transformed into a commodity-extracting hinterland for the *metropole* and an importer of manufactured consumer goods. This, in turn, led to an inconsistent process of industrialization that consequently prevented the development of an indigenous bourgeoisie. As underlined by Alexander (2010: 70), Tunisia's private sector was limited to commercial and trade sectors, with a few exceptions in the productive branches, and made up of small, family-run enterprises. The business class therefore lacked the capital, and the technical and managerial skills, rather than the desire, to respond to the government's incentives (Beinin 2016: 20). The whole picture was further worsened by the lack of foreign investments and by the capital flight to France in the aftermath of independence. By 1958, more than \$70 million had already left Tunisia (Alexander C. 2010: 70). In this situation, the 'socialist experiment' was launched by the government as the only way out of the economic crisis. This change of direction was symbolically confirmed in 1964 when, during its Congress in Bizerte, the *Neo-Destour* renamed itself the *Parti Socialiste Destourien* (PSD).

The architect of this new development strategy was Ahmed Ben Salah, the super-powerful Minister of the Economy, Finance, and Planning, who believed that only the state owned the necessary resources to foster an accelerated process of industrialization, in turn seen as key to achieving real independence from European powers. Import-substituting industrialization policies became the centrepiece of the government's economic action, leading to direct investments in several vital sectors, to planned and strictly interconnected industrial projects, to the construction of the necessary infrastructure, and to ever-expanding welfare programmes, with astonishingly high government spending in education (Findlay 1984: 222-223). Between 1962 and 1970, public investment was two times greater than the private one and accounted for over 70 per cent of the total (Cammatt 2007: 68). The number of state-owned enterprises grew from 25 in 1960 to nearly 185 in 1970, and among the newly created

companies there were several relevant industrial complexes, such as the SOGITEX textile plant in Ksar Hellal (not far from Monastir), the National Cellulose Company in Kasserine, and the oil refinery in Bizerte in the north (Alexander C. 2010: 74). At the same time, particular attention was also dedicated to the creation of rural cooperatives that would modernize the agricultural sector and boost production. However, and despite Ben Salah's great emphasis, only 700 cooperatives in the agricultural sector had been established by 1969. Even more significantly, these cooperatives were largely formed by retaking some of the most productive lands that had been owned by foreign landholders and by expropriating small peasants, who were grouped together, occasionally by force (Ruf 1984: 106). In this way, the implicit contract with private capital, and in particular with a key constituency of the ruling party – that is, large landowners in the Sahel – was protracted. In a similar vein, even at the height of the 'socialist experiment', the existence of private capital in the industrial and commercial sectors was never threatened by the presence of the cooperatives. On the contrary, pro-business measures were never abolished and during the 'socialist sixties' new enterprises received exemptions on many taxes for 5 or 10 years, subsidized short-term loans, and the state granted limitations on competitive imports (Cammett 2007: 70). As succinctly stated by Eva Bellin (1991: 49), the aim of Tunisian *dirigisme* was mainly to "centralize economic decision-making in the hands of the state bureaucrats rather than to realize socialism in Tunisia". Another surprising aspect of the planned economy was the way in which it was financed. Unlike Algeria, Tunisia could not rely on oil rents to foster industrialization. Similarly to Egypt, therefore, it was forced to borrow from abroad. However, whereas Nasserism was the quintessence of the corporatist state, Bourguiba's Tunisia always remained quite a hybrid regime. This was not only due to the partial independent role that the UGTT was able to retain, but also the government's decision to freeze salaries, in sharp contrast to Nasser's decision, at a time when the state's efforts were driven by the desire to industrialize the country. Especially after the IMF required the Tunisian dinar to be devalued in 1964 – a measure that indirectly cut real wages – the dynamic of class conflict, which, as demonstrated by the unauthorized strike of 6,000 miners in September 1962, was never completely tamed, escalated significantly (Belaid 1989: 201). Ben Salah's support in the UGTT was mainly among better-paid, educated, white-collar workers, who were able to tighten their belts and remained loyal to the 'socialist experiment'. In contrast, lower-paid, poorly educated, blue-collar workers, who were employed in the industrial and mining sector, especially in the south and centre-west, could not manage to offset the rising cost of living without wage increases (Beinin 2016: 21). Between 1962 and 1969, the real minimum wage increased by a feeble 3

per cent, whilst the real wage rose by only 1 per cent (Alexander C. 2010: 75). The constituency of semi-skilled and unskilled workers was represented by Habib Achour, who had become the UGTT's general secretary in 1963. The vocal critical union position on wages triggered a broad purge within its leadership, which culminated in Achour's arrest after his May Day 1965 speech. For the first time since independence, the ambivalent and ambiguous relationship between the UGTT and the state, which was to become a recurrent feature of the social and political dynamic in Tunisia, emerged.

The contradictory character of Tunisian *dirigisme* was translated into a weak – at least if compared to some of its neighbouring countries – historical bloc. It was mainly composed of bureaucrats, white-collar workers, and educated middle classes, whereas small peasants and industrial waged workers were not even included in a passive and subaltern position, as was the case, for instance, in Nasser's Egypt and Boumedienne's Algeria. It is true that the interests of landowners were not directly affected by the cooperative sector, but the fear that Ben Salah's project of collectivization of lands would escalate in the subsequent years determined their critical, although never openly adversarial, position towards the 'socialist experiment' (Findlay 1984: 223).

In 1969, there was a crucial turning point. International financial institutions presented their accounts for the loans granted in the previous years and asked for a re-liberalization of the economy (Ruf 1984: 107). In response to this, Ben Salah tried to generalize the cooperative movement to all agricultural lands, thereby threatening medium and large landowners in the Sahel (Anderson 1986: 239). Moreover, in the late 1960s, outbursts of popular discontent were reported among both peasants – with violent protests against the cooperative project – and mining and railroad workers, who launched wildcat strikes (Alexander C. 2010: 75). Fearing that Ben Salah was creating the structural conditions for an uprising, Bourguiba sacked the super-powerful minister, who was sentenced to ten years in prison. The 'socialist experiment' was over.

2.2 *Infitah* and class struggle

In 1970, Hedi Nour, former chief of Tunisia's Central Bank and a fierce opponent of Ben Salah's policies, was appointed prime minister, with the precise goal of steering the country back from the planned economy to the free market. Under his leadership, Tunisia became the first country in the MENA region to embrace the kinds of economic reforms that came to be

known as *infitah* ('opening' in Arabic), thereby anticipating a widespread trend in this geographical area in the following years. The sector in which the move was most drastic was certainly the agricultural one, where the cooperative system was dismantled and replaced by private ownership. Dispossessed farmers were allowed to retake their lands and former colonial properties were taken on by the state and then mainly sold to the private sector. Significantly, many of the small peasants who received back their lands found themselves without enough capital or with plots that were too small, and were implicitly forced to sell these to large landowners (Findlay 1984: 232). The process led to both a concentration of the most fertile and productive lands among a limited number of owners, who focused on speculative and export-oriented goods, and a rapid urbanization, with the main Tunisian cities expanding significantly in the subsequent decades (Ruf 1984: 107). On the outskirts of Tunis, Sfax, and Sousse, a new urban 'lumpenproletariat', forced by precarious social and economic conditions, took form. It was to become the main target of Political Islam in the 1980s and one of the main social forces of the 2010-2011 uprising.

Nouira's strategy was based on an export-oriented development. In particular, the economic opening was seen by the new prime minister as crucial, given the small domestic market of the country that could not absorb the goods produced by the industrial sector. The necessary import of a wide range of manufactured goods should have been compensated for by the export of some specific commodities, such as phosphates, petroleum, olive oil, and textiles (Alexander C. 2010: 76). The disengagement of state finance in the industrial sector, which was opened to private capital, was pursued through two new investment laws. The first one was voted in in 1972 and granted tax concessions and the duty-free import of capital equipment, raw materials, and semi-processed goods for new industrial projects. The second law, voted in two years later, focused more on incentives related to employment creation (Findlay 1984: 227-228). Both laws were driven by the desire to install in the country totally exporting enterprises, both foreign and local, giving rise to the term 'offshore industries' (Cammatt 2007: 73). These incentives were financed through a mix of international loans, bilateral agreements with Western donors, and the sharp increase in revenues derived from oil, workers' remittances, and tourism. After the discovery of the oilfield in El Borma in 1966, oil production started in earnest in the 1970s. Being favoured by the sharp increase in oil prices throughout the decade, hydrocarbon revenues increased from representing only 5 per cent of GDP and 15 per cent of total exports in 1971 to 11 and 38 per cent in 1981,

respectively (Murphy 1999: 85)³³. A second external source of wealth was international labour migration, a phenomenon that the Tunisian government strongly encouraged as a safety valve for domestic unemployment. The departure of migrant workers reached a peak in 1973 when in one year alone more than 20,000 Tunisians left the country to work in France, the most important host nation for Tunisian workers. In the following years, when recession affected Europe seriously, oil-rich Libya emerged as the new panacea. By 1975, at least 38,000 Tunisians had already arrived in the neighbouring country to find a job (Findlay 1984: 224-226). Finally, the development of the tourism industry, already started by Ben Salah in the 1960s, was the third pillar of the Tunisian economy. In 1970, for instance, the sector contributed 31.6 million dinars to GDP in foreign receipts, thereby covering 48.7 per cent of the national trade deficit (Di Peri 2015: 110).

The effects of Nour's policies were immediately impressive. Throughout the 1970s GDP growth reached over 7 per cent a year, 523 foreign firms were established between 1973 and 1978, and by 1978, 614 million dinars had been invested in light manufacturing industry and 86,500 new jobs had been created (Findlay 1984: 227-228). The opening to private investors was certainly a significant move, but it was not a complete break with the past.

The role of the state did not disappear. The Tunisian economy became, so to speak, a free market under strict supervision and direction of the state, which maintained the control of strategic sectors (such as phosphates, water, electricity, and hydrocarbons) and dedicated many resources to social programmes and infrastructure (Alexander C. 2010: 76). It might sound contradictory, but in the "golden age of business in Tunisia", more than 110 new state-owned enterprises were established by the government (Cammatt 2007: 73). Moreover, whilst the sectors left completely in the hands of private enterprises experienced slow growth, state-controlled industries did much better (Findlay 1984: 230).

Even more relevantly for this study, the development chosen and encouraged in the 1970s by the Tunisian government determined three important drawbacks, which would emerge as constitutive elements of the country in the following decades through a self-reinforcing process, becoming crucial aspects in explaining the fall of Ben Ali in 2011. First and foremost, the unequal internal development, a long-lasting legacy of the French domination, was strengthened rather than softened in the 1970s. For instance, 67,604 of the 86,468 new

³³ The drastic fall in oil prices in the late 1980s, the increase in domestic demand, and the lack of new relevant discoveries made revenues derived from oil rents scarcely significant in the following decades, leading to Tunisia being considered one of the hydrocarbon-poor countries in the Middle East since the 1990s.

jobs – that is, nearly 80 per cent of the total – created from 1973 and 1978 were concentrated in Greater Tunis and in the Sahel. In contrast, “many of the interior districts of the country such as Sidi Bouzid, Kairouan, Gafsa, and Kasserine [...] together received only 3.6 per cent of the new factories” (*Ibid.*: 229). It has to be stressed that many of these disadvantaged cities were the beating heart of the protest movement in 2010–2011. Second, an unbalanced pattern of industrial development followed, concentrating investments in textile, clothing, and leather companies (Cammett 2007: 74). By the end of 1977, 54 per cent of new investment and 87 per cent of new jobs had been concentrated in these three sectors (Findlay 1984: 229). Evidently, this might have suddenly become a tremendous boomerang in the case of the downfall of these light manufacturing branches. To make things worse, the dependence on European markets grew significantly. In 1976, for instance, 95 per cent of textile goods were exported to Europe, rendering the whole Tunisian economy subject to the fluctuation of the European markets. As we will see in the next section, many of these elements combined among themselves in the second half of the 2000s, putting the whole country under pressure. The first example of the risks of such a situation, however, became clear as early as in 1977, when Europe imposed new tariff barriers on textile imports. The immediate consequence was that 19 new textile factories closed down in the following years and more than 2,000 jobs were lost (*Ibid.*).

The damaging effect of the European economic stagnation on Tunisia was further exacerbated by the shrinking of the revenues derived from olive oil and phosphates. Consequently, Tunisia’s debt rose from 100 million dinars in 1974 to 344 million in 1977 (Ben Romdhane 1985: 280). In the second half of the 1970s, Nouria was therefore forced to reduce the bases of his support. The new and unstable historical bloc, which had taken form after Ben Salah’s dismissal, was saturated and started shrinking. It was mainly composed of landowners, who in sharp contrast to neighbouring countries had much closer urban ties; trade and commercial capitalists, who had grown and flourished in the ‘socialist’ period; and small and medium export-oriented businessmen, who, after having learned how to operate a textile factory in the state sector, now started their own business (Bellin 2002: 46-85; Hanieh 2013: 80). However, thanks to the economic growth, which allowed the state, through a new wage-bargaining system, to guarantee substantial pay increases to workers, the lower classes and the industrial proletariat in particular were also part of the bloc, although in a subaltern position. The deterioration of the economic situation disrupted this idyllic scenario, forcing the government to freeze salaries, whilst the inflation rate was over 10 per cent annually (Alexander C. 2010: 78). In this situation, a new and without precedent cycle of class mobilization took place,

forcing the UGTT leadership led by Achour, who had been rehabilitated in the post-Ben Salah era, to embrace radical positions, culminating in the first general strike since independence in 1978 (Beinin 2016: 32-36). The violent intervention of the army transformed the protests into a bloodbath, which became known as 'Black Thursday'. Then, in the immediate aftermath of the events, the regime cracked down violently on the UGTT leadership (Ruf 1984: 109). Again, some elements that are crucial for explaining the 2010–2011 Tunisian uprising were already present here. The UGTT proved its 'inability' to resist the radical demands from rank-and-file members or militant sections, and was therefore 'used' by revolutionary elements as a springboard to spark a direct and total confrontation with the state. Moreover, between the 1970s and the early 1980s, the members of the new left, which had emerged in previous years in the universities, began careers as teachers and white-collar workers, conquering some of those UGTT federations (such as postal workers, and primary and secondary education), which remained for decades strongholds of the leftist forces and played a central role in paving the way to Ben Ali's fall.

On the second anniversary of Black Thursday, a command of a few dozen Tunisians, acting with the backing of Libyan special forces, attacked Gafsa, the 'capital' of the mining basin. The group was able to take control of the city for nearly one week, before being outnumbered by the Tunisian army. The rebellion was therefore unsuccessful, failing to spread nationwide, but the regime was shocked by the events. As stated by Alexander (2010: 47), "it was one thing to have Tunisians in the streets. It was another thing entirely to have a self-styled 'liberation army' on the attack with Libyan support". To release tension, a new prime minister, Mohamed Mzali, known for his 'liberal' approach not only in the economic field, was appointed. When the 1981 parliamentary elections were approaching, the government announced that the one-party system was over and other political forces would be legalized. Temporary authorization was granted to the PCT, as well as to two other parties 'in waiting' – that is, the *Mouvement de l'Unité Populaire* (MUP), established by Ben Salah in 1973 after he had escaped from prison and had fled to Switzerland, and the *Mouvement des Démocrates Socialistes* (MDS), an internal and liberal-oriented split from the ruling party. In order to receive full legalization, however, these parties had to receive at least 5 per cent of the national vote, a scenario prevented by the regime itself that eventually cracked down violently on opposition forces just a few days before the vote and intervened to ensure a complete PSD

victory, which received 94.6 per cent of the vote³⁴. The process of political liberation was therefore immediately aborted, whilst other serious problems were looming on the horizon.

2.3 Neoliberalism, *de mise à niveau*, and social effects

By 1986, the Tunisian Central Bank had enough foreign exchange to cover just one week's worth of imports (Alexander C. 2010: 79). The suffocating and mounting debt and the lack of hard currencies forced the government to reschedule its debt, negotiating a structural adjustment programme with the IMF and WB. This was an effect of the process of economic liberalization and the consequent class-based reactions to this, which had advised the government to soften the initial damaging effects of the new opening to the market by reassuming a more critical role in the economy, ending up in fostering a high state deficit. As demonstrated by the fifth development plan (1977–1981), the need to balance market-oriented reforms and political stability had a price – state investments and public employment. By the mid-1980s, many public enterprises were operating at only 40–60 per cent of their capacity because they were overstaffed, whereas direct transfers to these plants rose from 8 per cent of government spending in 1972 to 17.5 per cent in 1984 (*Ibid.*: 78). Bourguiba's entourage's unwillingness to embrace more radical reforms was a serious hindrance to the country's financial stability. As stated by Murphy (1999: 103) and Hanieh (2013: 64), the 'medical coup' led by Ben Ali in November 1987 marked the real starting point of neoliberalism in Tunisia, resolving a critical phase and removing obstacles to broad reforms from the top down. As in many other structural adjustment programmes, the Tunisian government pursued two main goals: *a*) to reduce government expenditure; and *b*) to facilitate private investment. These two aspects were balanced and, to some extent, limited by the crucial need to maintain political stability at a time in which the threat of an Islamist takeover was particularly serious. The slow pace of privatization in the early phases of the launch of neoliberal reforms has therefore to be considered a deliberate attempt by the government not to provide a fertile ground for the rising of the Islamists, who were particularly able to recruit young unemployed men (Alexander C. 2010: 80).

The seventh development plan (1987–1991) was mainly intended to achieve macroeconomic stability and to remove resistance to the workings of the market. By 1992, several goals had

³⁴ The MDS obtained 3.2 per cent of the votes, whilst both the MUP and the PCT received less than 1 per cent.

already been attained. From 1987 to 1992 private-sector investment rose to 51 per cent of total investment, the current account deficit dropped from more than 8 per cent to just about 4 per cent, and the debt as a percentage of GDP fell from 63 per cent in 1986 to less than 55 per cent in 1991 (Dillman 1998: 16; Murphy 1999: 123). Moreover, Tunisia's GDP grew at an annual average rate of 3.9 per cent in the period 1985–1995. The eighth development plan (1992–1997) was largely driven by the intention to consolidate the initial steps, to encourage foreign direct investments, and to integrate more deeply with overseas markets (Murphy 2013: 37). By 1994, the first wave of privatization was over. Between 1989 and 1994, the government sold small enterprises in the services (especially in the touristic sector) and agribusiness companies to private buyers, who were forced not to reduce the workforce. According to Alexander (2010: 81), approximately 45 firms were sold for a total amount of just \$90 million. The second phase of privatization began in 1994, when not only was the process expanded to larger and more profitable firms, but it also included the sales of blocks of shares on the stock market, which in June 1995 was eventually open to foreign investors. Significantly, the capitalization of the Tunisian stock market nearly doubled in less than two years, jumping from \$2,525 billion in December 1994 to more than \$4,000 billion in August 1996 (Murphy 1999: 145). However, the crucial turning point in the eighth development plan was the approval of the Association Agreement with the European Union in 1995, thanks to which Tunisia became the first country on the southern shore of the Mediterranean to be integrated into the European market (Hanieh 2013: 56). The accord also established a 12-year transition period that would culminate in a completely free trade zone for industrial goods between Tunisia and the European Union (Alexander C. 2010: 82).

To prepare Tunisian enterprises for the challenges created by the agreement, the ninth development plan (1997–2001) was centred around the *programme de mise à niveau*, or industrial upgrading programme (Murphy 2013: 37). The plan, mainly financed by the World Bank and the European Union, provided financial and technical support for those enterprises that would enhance quality and efficiency (Hibou 2006b: 194). Particular attention was dedicated to the textile sector, which represented 40 per cent of Tunisia's exports and over half of all manufacturing jobs (Alexander C. 2010: 83; Hanieh 2013: 57). This sector, in which small and medium-sized plans represented more than 80 per cent of the total, was the beating heart of the entire economy and was threatened by the end of the Multifiber Agreement, scheduled for 2005 by the World Trade Organization (WTO). Since 1974, in fact, the agreement had allowed developing countries to impose quotas on imported textiles, thereby protecting emerging economies.

The tenth (2002–2006) and eleventh (2007–2011) development plans accelerated neoliberal reforms markedly, speeding up the process of privatization, which was no longer concentrated in a few specific sectors, but expanded to strategic and more remunerative branches of the economy. Whilst between 1988 and 1999 Tunisia’s privatization receipts reached \$0.59 billion, this jumped to \$3.65 billion in the period 2000–2008 (Hanieh 2013: 50). As shown by Table 1, nearly two-thirds of the total privatization revenue in the 2000s was concentrated in one year alone – that is, in 2006, when the government sold off 35 per cent of *Tunisie Telecom*. By December 2009, according to the data provided by the government, 219 state-owned enterprises had been partially or wholly privatized (Murphy 2013: 46). In a similar vein, the number of state-owned banks dropped from 53 in 2001 to 42 in 2007, whereas the number of foreign banks operating in the country escalated to 50 in 2009. Even more significantly, four of the top ten banks were foreign controlled by the late 2000s (Hanieh 2013: 61).

TABLE 1											
PRIVATIZATION IN US\$ MILLION, 1988-2008											
	1988-1998	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2000-2008
Tunisia	593	230	0	227	0	247	121	2,282	61	480	3,648

Source: Hanieh (2013: 50)

Macroeconomic indicators were once again positive. Between 2002 and 2006, annual growth averaged 4.5 per cent, rising to an astonishing 6.2 per cent in 2007. As a consequence of the global crisis, it slowed down in the following years, but it remained at a significant 3.8 per cent annually in the 2008–2010 period. The debt as a percentage of GDP went down from slightly more than 65 per cent in 2002 to 48.8 per cent in 2006, touching ironically the lowest level ever in Ben Ali’s Tunisia (40.2 per cent) in 2010. In a similar vein, foreign direct investment rose from around \$700 million in 2002 to \$2.36 billion in 2008. As long as these indicators were taken into consideration, the IMF reports in which Tunisia was presented as one of the most successful stories in the implementation of an “ambitious development strategy” were sharable (Murphy 2013: 40).

However, the ‘economic miracle’ also had another side of the coin. On the eve of the 2010–2011 uprising and after two decades of neoliberal reforms, Tunisia was a country highly

polarized in social terms, in which the rates of poverty, malnutrition, and unemployment were much higher than what the international institutions would admit. For instance, whilst the World Bank classified just 3.8 per cent of the population as poor, revised data revealed that the poverty level was 15.5 per cent in 2010 (Beinin 2016: 56-57). Moreover, had the numbers provided by the WB been correct, they would have omitted the real significance of a large middle class. In fact, although 89.5 per cent of Tunisians were categorized as middle class by the African Development Bank, they had little or no access to savings and half of them lived on between \$2 and \$4 per day, thereby risking falling into poverty in the event of even small economic shocks (Murphy 2013: 42).

In social terms, Ben Ali's Tunisia was characterized by three processes. To begin with, the living conditions, but arguably not salaries, of industrial workers declined steadily in the years that preceded the uprising. This was the effect, in turn, of the simultaneous combination of several elements. The relationship between labour and capital was profoundly reframed after the approval of the new Labour Code in 1996, in which it was stated that fixed-term contracts could be adopted for up to four years, after which workers had to receive open-ended contracts. The new Code, which granted legal status to temporary jobs, had been preceded by the establishment of two special economic zones, one in Bizerte and the other one in Zarzis (a small coastal town in the south of the country), in which all contracts were fixed-term ones as early as in 1992 (Feltrin 2016: 14). In the aftermath of the approval of the new Code, the spread of temporary jobs throughout the country was impressive. According to Hanieh (2013: 59), for instance, 68 per cent of the contracts in the textile industry were fixed-term ones and 19 per cent were non-standard in 2008³⁵. However, the instability of workers' conditions was, at least partially, compensated for by the increase of over 4 per cent in real wages in manufacturing from 1983 to 2009, mainly due to a tripartite agreement among the UGTT, the private owners' organization (UTICA, the French acronym), and the government in which the increase of salaries in real terms was linked to the rate of productivity growth (Beinin 2016: 59). This dynamic can help explain why Ksar Hellal – Tunisia's textile capital – was not at the forefront of the mobilization in the pre-2010 period, as it had been, for instance, in the late 1970s, and why, despite a huge concentration of textile enterprises with a symbolic importance comparable to Mahalla al-Kubra in the Nile Delta, industrial workers in Ksar Hellal remained largely in 'defensive' positions throughout the 2000s (*Liberation*, October

³⁵ The Tunisian government provided different numbers that, although scarcely reliable, are certainly an important proof of the wide diffusion of non-fixed-term jobs. According to the government, in the textile and garment sector 44 per cent of the contracts were non-permanent and 11 per cent were non-standard.

25, 2011). For instance, when between thirty-five and fifty thousand jobs – that is, about one-fifth of the total – were lost in the textile and clothing sectors due to the fall in exports towards the European Union between 2000 and 2005, there were protests and strikes, but these never spread nationwide, remaining limited to the specific factories in which lay-offs were threatened or implemented.

Second, and much more relevantly, the ‘withdrawal of the state’ as mediator of the contradiction of the market deeply affected poor and marginalized families. There was a substantial drop in the number of subsidized commodities and 87 per cent of food products had become fully unregulated by the late 2000s (Murphy 2013: 42). The government’s withdrawal left the Tunisian population, especially those poor households who spent up to 50 per cent of their income on food, vulnerable to the fluctuations in global food prices – a scenario that unfolded throughout the 2000s, when many staple foods doubled or even more their prices, especially in the post-2007 period. The areas most affected by the sudden leap in food prices were the peripheries of the main cities and, even more, the rural districts. No country in North Africa showed a higher social polarization between urban and rural areas than Tunisia, where the poverty rate was five times greater in the countryside than in the cities (Hanieh 2013: 83). Although the rural population dropped significantly in the last 40 years, decreasing from 57 per cent of the total population in 1970 to about 33 per cent in 2010, agriculture still contributed nearly 10 per cent of GDP and employed slightly less than one-fifth of the labour force on the eve of the uprising. The evident geographical inequality in Tunisia was partially the product of the long-lasting unequal development, which has constantly favoured the coastal areas, especially in the north-east of the country. Even more, this was the effect of land concentration in a few hands and of the unequal competition for natural agricultural resources – that is, water and more fertile grounds (Ayeb 2012: 91). In the late 2000s, while 53 per cent of farms were less than 5 hectares and made up only 11 per cent of the land, only the top 1 per cent of farms were greater than 100 hectares, representing more than a quarter of the whole agricultural land (Hanieh 2013: 83). The gradual emergence since the early 1970s of an export-oriented agriculture has meant an extraordinarily high concentration on a few products, reducing local biodiversity and jeopardizing the access to food for the lower classes. In particular, in drawing away large quantities of water from oases to create new irrigated areas on arid lands, several oases lost huge amounts of their cultivable surface. In the region of Gabes, for instance, agricultural land doubled between 1970 and 2010, but cultivated areas in the oases dropped from about 1,000 hectares to just 600 hectares in the same period (Ayeb 2012: 90-93). Since access to subsidies and loans, which are

necessary to start this new form of intensive agricultural production, was possible only for a limited number of families, the reduction of oases in favour of irrigated lands meant social polarization and pauperization of ‘traditional’ farmers. Many of them ended up working as seasonal and badly paid employees on big farms in which just a few goods (such as olive oil, dates, and tomatoes) were produced. According to Hanieh (2013: 87), for instance, olive cultivation occupied 30 per cent of the agricultural land area, involving no less than one-third of the farmer population in the late 2000s. In addition, the market started being controlled by just a handful of companies, which sometimes, as demonstrated by the case of the joint venture between the Tunisian company Delice and Danone, had strong ties to multinational groups. Arguably, the most known case of market concentration was represented by the Poulina Group, which controlled 60 per cent of the imported wheat, barley, and other cereals, 60 per cent of the ice cream market, and 53 per cent of the margarine sector (*Ibid.*: 93).

Third, in Ben Ali’s period, the state not only lost its role as a mediator of market imbalances, but also its function as an employer. Working with the data provided by the *Institut National de la Statistique*, it can be underlined that public employment declined from 41 per cent of wage earners in 1980 to no more than 27 per cent in 2010. Similarly, the share of wages and salaries in government expenditure declined by about 10 percentage points in just five years, from 65 per cent in 2003 to 55 per cent in 2008 (Hanieh 2013: 69). Young graduates were the most affected by the shrinking of state jobs. As is widely known, this was a common problem throughout North Africa. In Tunisia, however, it was exacerbated by two trends. To begin with, in an attempt to foster an accelerated process of modernization, in the immediate aftermath of independence the government invested a huge amount of resources in education, determining the presence of a relatively highly educated labour force. When young graduates no longer found their ‘natural’ employer in the state, they were forced to find a job in the private sector. For many of them, this became an extremely arduous task. The structure of the Tunisian economy based on an export-oriented model of low-technology products required low-skilled workers (Murphy 2013: 43). Moreover, the crucial role played by the textile and garment sectors, in which around one-third of all manufacturing jobs were concentrated, and the high percentage of female employment in these industrial branches – not less than 65 per cent of the total, according to Hanieh (2013: 59) – meant that many young and highly educated men could not enter the job market. Although the data provided by Tunisian institutions might not be completely reliable, underestimating the actual rate of unemployment, it is certainly interesting to note that this tended to grow as the level of

education grew. In other words, as clearly shown by Table 2, the rate of unemployment was the lowest among illiterate people and the highest among graduate students in 2010.

TABLE 2	
UNEMPLOYMENT RATE BY LEVEL OF EDUCATION (%), 2010	
Illiterate	5,7
Primary	9,2
Secondary	13,7
Higher	22,9
Source: Institut National de la Statistique	

To make ends meet, many of these young men found precarious and unstable jobs in the ever-expanding informal sector – that is, in that grey area between legal and illegal activities. Estimates of the real consistency of the informal sector vary tremendously, generally being put between 30 and 50 per cent of total employment. Arguably, an episode can tell us much more about the lack of adequate jobs for graduate students than unreliable numbers. As already stated in the first section of this chapter, after Bouazizi had set himself ablaze, activists and union members deliberately promoted an adapted version of his story as an unemployed university graduate who was working as a street vendor. This was certainly an attempt to mobilize the 250,000 jobseekers with a university degree throughout the country (Gana 2013: 10). The story, and this is what matters, sounded plausible to them, demonstrating indirectly the relevance of the phenomenon and how the informal sector was actually one of the few ways out to many unemployed university graduates.

3. The narrowing of the regime's support

Throughout the whole uprising, the RCD failed to mobilize a single mass-based demonstration in support of the government. In addition, when, on January 14, 2011, a pro-Ben Ali gathering was eventually organized in Tunis by RCD General Secretary Mohamed Ghariani, several members of the ruling party defected and joined the two-hour strike called by the UGTT (Angrist 2013: 553). Suddenly, it became clear that the bases of support for the regime had been transformed into empty shells during the preceding decade. Why was this the case?

After Ben Ali's coup, the transformation of the economic structure went hand in hand with a significant reconfiguration of the historical bloc, which was numerically much more limited than in the recent past and presented an internal composition more linked to international dynamics. It was composed of productive capitalists in the textile and garment sectors of the north-eastern coast, who maintained in a supposedly free market strict and convenient relations with Ben Ali's family; of trade and commercial businessmen, who operated as gatekeepers to those European (Italian and French, in particular) enterprises that after the 1995 Association Agreement hoped to have access to the European markets benefitting from lower wages and incentives provided by the Tunisian environment; and of high-ranking bureaucrats, who a long time before had started considering themselves a ruling class. Moreover, this new historical bloc received the full support of international financial institutions, of Western and Gulf capitals, and of European governments. By having maintained a privileged position within Tunisian affairs, thanks to its status as a former colonial power, France was a key supporter of Ben Ali's Tunisia. As is quietly well known, as protests escalated in January 2011, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Michèle Alliot-Marie, offered "the knowledge and experience of [French] security forces" to crush the movement (Kallander 2013: 103). This was a sharp confirmation of the long-lasting friendship between liberal democratic Western governments and authoritarian Tunisia.

The narrowness of the social bases of the regime, which, in adopting an export-oriented model of economic development and being 'forced' to promote austerity measures could not integrate in a passive and subaltern position the lower classes as it had done in the previous decades, was partially counterbalanced by the creation of two institutions. In 1992, the *Fonds National de Solidarité* (FNS) was established. The National Solidarity Fund, better known as *Caisse 26-26* or simply 26-26, from the postcode to which people were encouraged to mail donations, was a fund designed to "eradicate shaded spaces", in contrast to the deep root of fundamentalism (Hibou 2006b: 199-201). Thanks to the fund, the government was able to provide potable water, electricity, sewerages, roads, housing, schools, and health assistance for marginal and impoverished areas, avoiding for several years a political radicalization of the poor and making implicitly weaker the Islamist appeal (Alexander C. 2010: 67). Officially, the FNS was financed through so-called voluntarily donations, but in reality all firms were 'encouraged' to give a certain amount of money per month and per employee (Tsourapas 2013: 6). Moreover, enterprises also had to "donate large sums at certain moments of the year, such as 7 November (the anniversary of Ben Ali's arrival to power), 8 December

(Solidarity Day), during the election period or, more generally, to ensure the authorities' good will" (Hibou 2006b: 199). The second institution created by Ben Ali's regime, shortly after the FNS, was the *Banque Tunisienne de Solidarité* (BTS). The Tunisian Solidarity Bank was similarly inspired by the desire to safeguard the economic reforms and results obtained, immunizing the system against those social forces that, being excluded from the new social pact, might have threatened it. However, rather than being directed towards infrastructure projects, the BTS targeted Tunisian citizens directly, granting access to funds necessary for the activities of small business owners and farmers as well (Tsourapas 2013: 6). Although the main function of these institutions was redistributive in economic and social terms, the FSN and BTS went far beyond this, becoming instruments of control and repression (Hibou 2006b: 201). Marginalized sectors were forced to rely on the state's agencies for aid and survival, ending up tacitly supporting the regime and the president, who was able to present himself as "a friend of the poor" and fostered a sultanistic cult of his personality, which was represented by the omnipresence of number 7 – that is, the day on which Ben Ali took power (Tsourapas 2013: 8). Factory owners, on the other hand, through 'voluntary' donations to the state could work without exaggerated tax controls and with easier access to public markets (Hibou 2006b: 199). In short, thanks to the FSN and BTS, a new system of disciplinary control was established, allowing the regime to avoid mere brutal repression. Evidently, this is not to say that control and state violence were not crucial elements in understanding the stability of the regime.

Although Ben Ali, in sharp contrast to Bourguiba, was the product of Tunisia's armed forces and security establishments, the long-lasting marginalization of the military did not end with the 1987 'medical coup'. The military therefore remained small both in terms of size and resources, especially in comparison to Tunisia's neighbouring countries, and it was also kept away from politics and daily coercive functions (Brooks 2013: 209). In contrast, internal surveillance was the main goal of a super-powerful Ministry of the Interior, which numbered no less than 130,000 men in the late 2000s. The numerically significant and constantly obsessive presence of both uniformed and plainclothes officers throughout the country transformed Ben Ali's Tunisia into "*un commissariat*" (Sadiki 2002: 68), or to use Khiari's words (quoted in Tsourapas (2013: 8)) into a "perfect panoptic system. Not only is everyone seen from everywhere but everyone is equally blind". However, despite the emergence of a heavily policed state, security forces largely comprised – especially in their lowest ranks – intellectually and socially poor men, often not well paid, trained, and managed. To avoid

protests and to break up gatherings of the opposition forces they simply relied on sheer force of numbers, usually adopting an excessive and completely disproportionate use of violence against peaceful protesters. This was even more true when, as demonstrated by the 2008 revolt in Gafsa, opposition was not limited to a few hundred middle-class and Tunis-based elements, but encompassed thousands of people (Chouikha and Geisser 2010: 421). A similar scenario occurred again in the first days of January 2011 in Kasserine and Thala, where the security forces came under attack. Being outnumbered by protesters, they simply panicked and fired on unarmed demonstrators, leading in turn to a further radicalization of the protest movement.

In short, the combination of *a)* a small in numbers, but powerful in composition, historical bloc, which had strong links to international forces, *b)* the political ‘neutralization’ of the most disadvantaged social sectors through the establishment of institutions to limit zones of extreme poverty, and *c)* the ubiquitous surveillance of the security forces made Ben Ali’s authoritarianism particularly stable for more than two decades. This stability was surprising for many scholars, who, inspired by the modernist argument formulated by the late Seymour Lipset (1959), saw as a tremendous contradiction the relatively high income per capita of the country and the totally authoritarian character of the Tunisian regime (for a summary of this debate, see Camau (2008: 509)). At the same time, by the end of the 1990s the new corporatist pact advanced by Ben Ali had already appeared to one of the finest scholars on Tunisia to be “ultimately unsustainable in its present form” (Murphy 1999: 233). Throughout the 2000s, this dynamic emerged much more clearly when middle-class professional groups – once reliable agents of the regime – became increasingly ambivalent about remaining on its side. As we will see in the section dedicated to the pro-democracy movement, journalists, magistrates, and above all lawyers rose up as vocal constituencies in the opposition ranks. Even more significantly, what Angrist (2013: 553) describes as the “natural constituencies” of the regime – that is, the RCD ruling party, businessmen, and middle-class women – gradually became alienated. In the final stages of the uprising, when the regime was desperately looking for support, they eventually defected, leaving Ben Ali alone with his restricted entourage.

In the aftermath of Ben Ali’s coming to power, a new lease of life was given to the ruling party, which was renamed, thereby abandoning any symbolic and paradoxical reference to ‘socialism’. The term *rassemblement* (rally) was intended to indicate the unifying character of the new party, which should have served as a unifying force and a vehicle of stability (Sadiki 2002: 65). A profound reorganization, in order to revitalize a structure that in Bourguiba’s last years had been increasingly divided on several issues, was pursued. By the end of the 1990s,

the RCD sections had already passed from about 6,000 in 1989 to 7,800, whilst in the capital the presence of the ruling party was intensified, splitting the territory of Tunis into five districts, each overseen by a separate coordination committee (Angrist 1999: 94). Despite these initial attempts and numbering, according to the official and evidently inflated figures provided by the regime, no less than 2.5 million members out of a total population of slightly more than 10 million on the eve of the uprising, the RCD was not able to support the regime in any way when it came under attack (Ayeb 2011: 470). This apparently surprising contradiction was the product of the transformation of the RCD into a party of puppets, who were completely subjugated to the presidential palace and lacked any link to the Tunisian society. In sharp contrast to Bourguiba, who had chosen for three decades ministries and top-ranking party officials with their own solid bases, Ben Ali filled his cabinets with docile technocrats without any real support in society (Alexander C. 2010: 66). The RCD consequently became the organ through which presidential decisions were ratified and communicated, but completely lost its function of representing, even in spurious and clientelistic ways, segments of the middle class. Precisely because the ruling party was transformed into a clique chosen and selected by Ben Ali, criticisms and votes against the government – especially after opposition forces made their first and historical appearance in the Parliament – were no longer tolerated by the President (Angrist 1999: 99). Moreover, after the constitutional amendments in 2002 and the 2003 anti-terrorism law, the executive strengthened its position vis-à-vis the ruling party, which was outplayed by the families of the President and his wife as the crucial decision-making centre. The RCD's leaders resentment of Ben Ali became spectacularly visible in July 2005, when a critical declaration of presidential ill treatment of the party appeared on the Internet. The document was signed by *les Destouriens Démocrates* – thereby making a clear reference to Bourguiba's era – and claimed to be representative of a silent RCD majority (Angrist 2013: 552). Another problematic aspect for the RCD was the de facto establishment of a multi-party system. The process of economic development and modernization had produced, since the late 1960s, new forms of expression that the one-party system was unable to contain. This tendency became even more evident in the following decades, leading to widespread expectations of (at least) partial recognition of political pluralism when Ben Ali came to power and promised a multi-party system. However, the 'democratic experiment' was short-lived and Tunisia remained one of the most autocratic countries in North Africa (Sadiki 2002: 62). The demands of several segments of society for a more pluralistic representation of the interests could have been addressed in two ways by the regime – through either an openness of the ruling party to

embrace more and different constituencies or allowing for a partially competitive parliamentary system. However, neither of the two paths was followed by the regime, which therefore could neither mobilize the RCD nor co-opt opposition forces when protests erupted. In short, the system was without any safety valve.

This is not to say that the one-party system was not formally abandoned. Six opposition parties, which shared a strong anti-Islam, centralist, and pro-urban identity, were legalized in the late 1980s and four of them were able to obtain parliamentary representation for the first time in 1994 (see Table 3)³⁶. Similarly, since 1999 a farcical and severely restricted competition had been guaranteed in presidential elections too, where Ben Ali never received less than 90 per cent of the votes. As underlined by Fuentes (2010: 526-529), the legalization of some parties, but not others, and the opportunity given by the regime to some political forces to obtain parliamentary representation introduced two relevant divisions in the opposition environment. Yet, the attempt to split anti-regime forces and set one against the other was not completely successful. There are at least three main reasons for this.

TABLE 3							
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN BEN ALI'S TUNISIA, 1989-2009 (% OF VOTES AND SEATS)							
	1989	1994	1999	2004		2009	
	Seats	Seats	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats
Rassemblement Const. Démocratique (RCD)	141	144	148	87,6	152	84,6	161
Mouvement des Démoc. Socialistes (MDS)	0	10	13	4,6	14	4,6	16
Union Démocratique Unioniste (UDU)	0	3	7	2,2	7	2,5	9
Parti d'Unité Populaire (PUP)	0	2	7	3,6	11	3,4	12
Ettajdid	0	4	5	1,0	3	0,5	2
Parti Social-Libéral (PSL)	0	0	2	0,6	2	2,2	8
Verts*						1,7	6
Others				0,4	0	0,5	0
Total Seats	141	163	182	100,0	189	100,0	214
Notes: The percentage of votes for each party is not available for the period 1989-1999; *This party was founded in 2004							
Source: King (2009: 175)							

To begin with, while moderate Political Islam was incorporated into the attempt to rebuild the state institution in post-civil war Algeria and partially tolerated in Mubarak's Egypt, it was

³⁶ The six officially recognized parties were the *Parti d'Unité Populaire* (PUP), the *Parti Social-Libéral* (PSL), the *Union Démocratique Unioniste* (UDU), the *Mouvement des Démocrates Socialistes* (MDS), the *Parti Communiste Tunisien* (PCT), later renamed *Ettajdid* (Renewal Movement), and the *Rassemblement Socialiste Progressif* (RSP).

completely repressed in Tunisia. Ennahda never obtained legalization and Islamist members were jailed and socially excluded (Hibou 2006b: 188-189). Second, the legal parties did not enjoy any degree of autonomy from the regime, being disqualified in the eyes of ordinary citizens and representing cliques of middle-class and Tunis-based elements with no support at all in society. As demonstrated by the violent crackdown on the MDS in the post-1995 municipal elections (when the party leadership embraced critical stances towards the regime), opposition forces were tolerated as long as they remained silent and willing to play Ben Ali's game (Angrist 1999: 94-97). The price of holding radical and alternative views, as shown by the harsh repression experienced by the PCOT, was political illegality and a regime witch-hunt. Eventually, throughout the 2000s the liberal camp emerged as the third pole of the real opposition to the regime – as an alternative to the long-lasting Marxist and Islamist traditions. The two main forces here were the former RSP, renamed after the 2001 congress the *Parti Démocratique Progressiste* (PDP), which boycotted the 2004 and 2009 elections, and the *Congrès pour la République* (CPR), founded in 2001 by Moncef Marzouki, which was never legalized under Ben Ali. The CPR and, in particular, the PDP became the beating heart of the opposition, determining that the divisions established by the regime – between legal and illegal parties and between parties with or without parliamentary representation – were surpassed by the emergence of these two new political forces (see Table 4).

TABLE 4							
THE TUNISIAN OPPOSITION ENVIRONMENT, IN THE LATE 2000s							
Ideological Family	Party	Legal Status		Parliam. Elections		Towards Islamism	
		Legal	Illegal	Won Seats	Boycotted	Pro Collabor.	Against Collabor.
Liberal	PSL	x		x			x
	MDS	x		x			x
	CPR		x		x	x	
	PDP	x			x	x	
Nasserist	PUP	x		x			x
	UDU	x		x			x
Ecologist	Verts	x		x			x
Marxist	Ettajdid	x		x			x
	PCOT		x		x	x	
Islamist	Ennahda		x		x	x	
Source: My own elaboration							

In the last years of Ben Ali's power, whilst the RCD had been transformed into a party of puppets and the legal opposition did not represent any actual economic or social group, the anti-parliamentary forces became a point of reference for anti-regime elements, putting together several and often at-odds ideological traditions.

The second constituency that was considered an ally of Ben Ali nearly by default was represented by small and medium businessmen. After all, it was argued, the openness to the market, the withdrawal of the state from a direct role in the economy, and the process of privatization were all advantageous steps for the owners. However, in Ben Ali's last decade, small and mid-sized businesses became increasingly critical of the government, eventually taking part in anti-regime protests during the uprising and playing a crucial role in the emergence of a cross-class coalition, as demonstrated by what happened in Sfax on January 12, 2011.

The gradual estrangement from the regime of large parts of the vital private sector was, first and foremost, the product of the way in which privatization was conducted. State assets, rather than being sold in an open contest at market values, were simply privatized at discounted prices to Ben Ali's extended family and to the president's close friends (Murphy 2013: 46). According to King (2009: 179-180), the two groups that benefitted most from privatization were the sons-in-law of the President (the best known of whom were Slim Chiboub and Marouane Mabrouk) and Trabelsi's family, who, before Leila Trabelsi's marriage to Ben Ali, were economically modest. A geographical division of the richest assets of the country took place between these two constituencies – which were sometimes also at war one against the other – along with the Trabelsi clan, which dominated Greater Tunis, and Ben Ali's siblings and children concentrated along the coastal plains of Sousse and Monastir. Although estimates of the presidential family wealth varied significantly, there is no doubt that it “controlled whole sectors such as media, cement production, petroleum distribution, construction, car dealerships, telecommunications, insurance, shipping, and air transport” (Murphy 2013: 49). This means that between 30 and 40 per cent of the national economy came under the direct control of Ben Ali and Trabelsi's clans, which played a crucial role in giving access to lucrative licences and concessions. The second important element in understanding the anti-Ben Ali stances taken by many entrepreneurs was the progressive emergence of a gap between higher and lower echelons of this social class – that is, between an export-oriented and politically well-connected bourgeoisie, generally located in the north-east of the country, and a marginalized entrepreneurial class, which operated in a subordinate position for multinational firms and was far away, both in geographical and political terms,

from Tunis. As emphasized by Murphy (1999: 228), this tendency was already clear in the late 1990s, and became even more blatant in the second half of the 2000s when the end of the multi-fibre agreement and the complete opening of the Tunisian market put under pressure local enterprises that produced goods for global brands. In this situation, the implicitly forced payment of the National Solidarity Fund, which was quite onerous for some enterprises, became less justifiable in the eyes of businessmen, who in a hyper-corrupted environment were paying the bill for the social protection of the poor and the private enrichment of Ben Ali's family (Hibou 2006b: 200). Similarly, after Hédi Djilani took the leadership of the UTICA in 1988, the organization, which traditionally had been dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises, given the specific configuration of Tunisian capitalism, became the voice of large capital holders, leaving silent the beating heart of the Tunisian economy (Cammett 2007: 126). Unsurprisingly, therefore, when an anti-Ben Ali movement took form and strength, marginalized and burdened small and medium entrepreneurs joined it.

Finally, Ben Ali's last 'natural constituency' was represented by middle-class women, especially those with a high education and urban background. The progressive family and gender law code established by Bourguiba, who also banned the hijab in government buildings in 1981 and in higher education institutions some years later, was seen by secular women as a defensive wall against the Islamists' attempt to introduce more restrictive and conservative gender measures. In the early 1990s, some feminist organizations – such as the *Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates* (ATFD) and the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR) – emerged as key and vocal supporters of Ben Ali's regime (Marks 2013: 229). However, the initial unconditional support gradually evolved into a passive consensus and sometimes, as shown by the ATFD, into open dissent towards the regime (Angrist 2013: 551). This was the product of three factors: *a*) the vanishing of the threat of an Islamist takeover; *b*) Ben Ali's inability to reform the Personal Status Code, leaving untouched norms concerning the primacy of males in family matters; and *c*) the strong authoritarian posture chosen by the regime, which significantly limited the social and political freedom of secular and left-leaning women.

By the late 2000s, Ben Ali's regime had alienated its main bases of support, finding itself without civilian assistance on which to rely when protests broke up. Unfortunately for him, however, no civilian regime can survive with the mere buttress of harsh repression.

4. Towards Bourguiba Avenue

4.1 UGTT: The weakest link of the agencies of power

When Camau and Geisser (2003: 222) described the UGTT as “*le maillon faible des agences de pouvoir*”, they not only convincingly summarized the historical ambivalent character of the union, but also its much more recent structural ambivalence. The roots of the latter are closely examined here. It was indeed the pressure exercised by militant rank-and-file members, as well as by radical cells and federations, that eventually broke the hierarchical circle of a structure that at its top level was not much more than a mere puppet in the hands of the regime. The need to balance the interests of the regime and, at the same time, not to completely lose credibility in front of its members led the UGTT’s leadership to grant freedom to call protests and strikes at its regional levels during the uprising (Yousfi 2015: 85-89). Eventually, this compromise within the UGTT’s structure became a formidable springboard for the protest movement, which took full advantage of the organizational weight of the union. Had the UGTT been transformed into a completely empty shell – as, for instance, was the case with the ETUF in Egypt – the pressure from below would have failed to revitalize the union. Had the dissonance between the leadership and membership been more limited (with the former closer to the latter), the calling of a national strike under the strict control of the union bureaucracy might have worked as a safety valve to release pressure on the regime. However, it was the sharp contradiction in which the UGTT found itself – being at the same time the only mass-based organization that linked the regime to the population and representing the shelter (*maljaâ*) of popular discontent – that turned the union (often seen as corrupted and co-opted) into the accidental gravedigger of Ben Ali’s regime.

In the aftermath of the January 1984 bread riots, which had been quashed by the state’s repression, the regime cracked down violently on the UGTT. The pretext was a simply threatened general strike, after Prime Minister Mohamed Mzali had announced, in April 1985, a new economic course in which wage increases would be linked to rises in productivity rather than in the cost of living. The actual reason, however, was an attempt to clean up the ground in anticipation of the implementation of the structural adjustment programme, which was increasingly required by the deterioration of the country’s economic situation (Murphy 1999: 187). Moreover, as the augmentation of salaries and social benefits had not paid off in the 1970s, a more authoritarian posture was assumed by the Tunisian government.

Throughout 1985, the regime eliminated the automatic 1 per cent check-off for union dues among public workers; threatened the UGTT monopoly in the representation of workers by encouraging the development of the rival UNTT (*Union Nationale des Travailleurs Tunisiens*), which had been formed the year before by expelled UGTT members; sequestered UGTT bank accounts; suspended the publication of the union newspaper *Al-Shaab* (the people) for six months; occupied several trade union provincial headquarters; and arrested over 350 elected union representatives, including General Secretary Habib Achour (Bellin 2002: 112-113). Not surprisingly, from 1984 to 1987 the real value of the minimum wage in Tunisia decreased by over 20 per cent (Beinin 2016: 48). In addition, the number of strikes plummeted from 545 in 1984 to just 170 in 1986, with the number of workers involved in such actions diminishing from over 130,000 in 1983 (there are no data available for 1984) to fewer than 20,000 in 1986 (Bellin 2002: 110-114). As underlined by Zemni (2013: 137), “by the end of 1985, the UGTT was effectively paralyzed”.

The arrest of Achour, the purge in the union ranks of the ‘old’ guard, and the rise of a new generation of technocrats who saw themselves as conciliators rather than agitators pushed the UGTT into a relation of “normalization” with the regime. The special congress of the UGTT in Sousse in April 1989 was the crucial turning point in this process (Murphy 1999: 187). The election of the new secretary general, Ismail Sahbani, marked both the approval of a platform of cooperation with the government and the marginalization of leftists and Islamists. The latter, after having ignored the labour movement throughout the 1970s and 1980s, started making inroads into the UGTT in the months following Ben Ali’s coup. Nevertheless, the Islamist supporters never accounted for more than 5 to 10 per cent of the union electorate and just about 50 of the more than 400 delegates to the UGTT’s Sousse congress could be seen as Islamists (Alexander 2000: 475). In the 1990s, the UGTT became therefore a managerial or administrative union, whose main task was to safeguard social peace in a changing economic environment, thereby avoiding assuming an overly militant behaviour (Zemni 2013: 138). The subjugation of the union was pursued by the regime through two strategies. To begin with, a greater integration of the UGTT into the state structures took place. The meetings involving the representatives of the government, the union, and the UTICA, which had already been established in 1973, became regular triennial bargaining processes focusing on wage increases and other economic policies. Moreover, the UGTT was also included in different government bodies, such as the Economic and Social Council (Netterstrøm 2016: 387). Secondly, the internal structures of the UGTT were heavily infiltrated by pro-regime figures. On some occasions, as demonstrated by the case of Amara Abbassi (see section 4.2

for further details), regional chiefs of the union were also members of the ruling party and parliament deputies.

The normalization of the UGTT was not, however, uniform. Some federations (especially those of primary and secondary education, the postal sector, and the public health service) and some regional units (such as Sfax) were able to hold on to some degree of autonomy (Zemni 2013: 138). At the same time, as correctly underlined by Netterstrøm (2016: 388), the distinction between moderate and radical sections should not be overestimated, given the fact that some kind of cooperation with the regime remained an inescapable feature for every section of the union. In any case, the presence of resistant federations – in many cases simply scattered cells – was important for two main reasons. On the one hand, while the UGTT was transformed into “an essential transmission belt for the political authorities”, it remained less docile than the regime wished (Hibou 2006a: 147). On the other, the long-lasting historical ambivalence of the union, which has constantly fluctuated throughout its own history between being the *bras armé du régime* and representing one of the main strongholds of the opposition forces, was exacerbated by the emergence of a new ambivalence. Whilst the national leadership was (almost) completely co-opted by the regime, the local unions – or at least some of these – remained militant. This structural ambivalence led to what Chouikha and Geisser (2010: 417) defined as “the two UGTTs”, a tendency further strengthened by the replacement of Sahbani, who was charged with corruption and embezzlement of money belonging to the union, along with his number two, Abdesslem Jerad, in September 2000. In order to regain popularity and restore its reputation, the new general secretary granted a greater degree of independence to regional and local sections, a decision that ended up exacerbating the structural ambivalence of the UGTT (Netterstrøm 2016: 393). Moreover, less evidently pro-regime positions were assumed by the union, which backed Ben Ali’s candidacy in the presidential elections in 2004 and 2009 with much less emphasis in comparison to what it had done in 1994 and 1999, and became more critical of some of the government’s decisions, such as the presence of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon at the World Summit on the Information Society, which was held in Tunis in 2005 (Zemni 2013: 139).

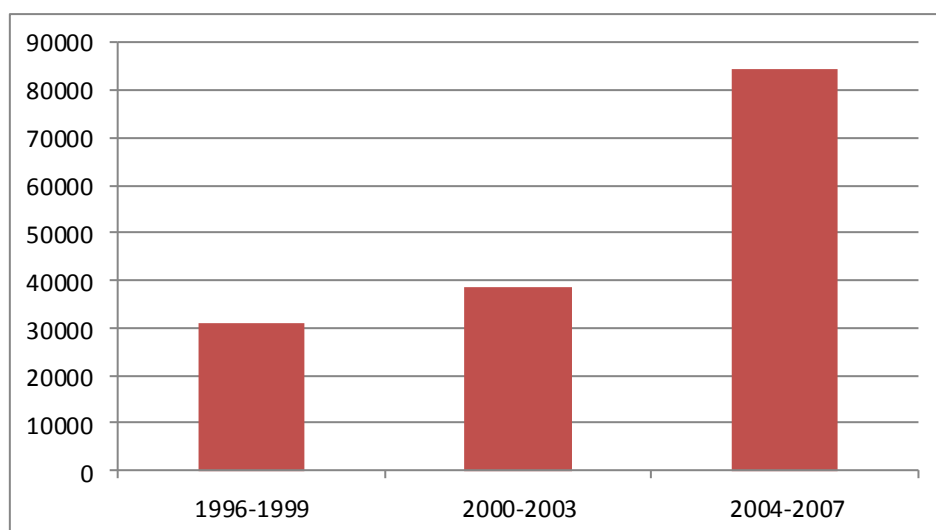
4.2 Labour and social waves of protest

As shown by the data on the number of strikes in Table 5, they increased significantly in the last decade of Ben Ali’s power from a yearly average of fewer than 300 episodes between

1996 and 1999 to about 380 from 2000 and 2003, and up to more than 400 actions in the period 2004–2007.

TABLE 5		
NUMBER OF STRIKES AND WORKERS INVOLVED, 1996-2010		
Year	Number of Strikes	Number of Strikers
1996	300	27,751
1997	305	35,683
1998	277	28,160
1999	308	31,989
2000	411	35,886
2001	380	38,242
2002	345	33,386
2003	395	46,893
2004	391	44,637
2005	466	78,953
2006	392	115,443
2007	382	98,219
2008	n.a.	n.a.
2009	n.a.	n.a.
2010	420-465	n.a.

Source: Beinin (2016: 72, 127)



Graph 1: Number of strikers, 1996-2007

Even more significantly, the number of workers involved in strikes skyrocketed (graph 1), increasing from a yearly average of about 30,000 people in 1996–1999 to slightly fewer than 40,000 in 2000–2003, up to an astonishing 84,300 in 2004–2007.

A closer examination of these data suggested some further considerations. To begin with, although there are no numbers for 2008 and 2009, several clues pointed to a sharp intensification of workers' protests in these two years, especially in 2008 when a difficult collective bargaining among the government, the UGTT, and the UTICA was discussed for months³⁷. Second, throughout the whole period (1996–2007) some 52 to 70 per cent of the strikes were in manufacturing. This means that, given the already described crucial role of this sector in the Tunisian economy, these workers' actions posed a serious threat to Ben Ali's regime and his attempt to promote the country as an ideal outpost for European enterprises in search of cheap labour and social peace. Third, since only between four and 30 strikes per year were reported in the education, public health, and social work sectors – that is, in the traditional strongholds of the Tunisian labour movement – it is extremely likely that the total number of strikes was actually much greater than reported, thereby showing the extraordinary and long-lasting mobilization of workers in Tunisia. As underlined by Beinín (2016: 72), “the per capita number of strikes was far greater in Tunisia than in Egypt”. Nevertheless, most of the strikes in Tunisia were short-lived, lasting only a day or two, because the UGTT leadership authorized them to offer a safety valve to the mounting pressure from below rather than as a form of workers' mobilization. To a great extent, workers' protests were defensive reactions to the (real or expected) worsening of their living conditions, and almost never escalated into a full and direct confrontation between labour and the state.

To conclude, throughout the 2000s the mobilization of blue-collar workers was certainly relevant and important. Yet, the “transformative event” that accelerated markedly the accumulation of anti-regime energies was not the consequence of a ‘classic’ industrial workers' mobilization, as happened in Egypt (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 101). Rather, it was the product of the unusual alliance in the poorest areas of the country between precarious workers and the unemployed, on the one hand, and radical UGTT junior cadres in the public administration, especially in the educational sector, on the other.

The six-month-long popular revolt in the Gafsa basin started as a protest against the fraudulent results of the recruitment of 380 temporary technicians, administrative assistants, and manual workers in the Gafsa Phosphate Company (CPG, the French initialism). Then, it

³⁷ For the first time, in 2008, these three institutional actors bargained on labour and economic issues in their regular triennial meeting after the ending of the Multi-fibre Agreement in 2005 had already shown its disruptive effects on manufacturing in Tunisia. The UTICA's attempt to regain profit margins for 'its' enterprises by freezing salaries was sharply at odds with the UGTT's main concern about defending jobs at any cost. These frictions created more space for workers' protests.

rapidly evolved into something rather different. On the one hand, ‘the rebellion of the people of the mines’, as it was often labelled, was a sharp critique of the pro-regime posture assumed by the UGTT’s regional leadership. In particular, the paradigmatic figure of Amara Abbassi – who at the same time was general secretary of the UGTT’s bureau at Gafsa, a member and deputy of the RCD, and owner of several subcontracting companies linked to the CPG – was the ‘natural’ target of the protest (Gobe 2010a: 6). On the other, the movement became a direct challenge to the regime, which replied with unusual – even for Tunisian standards – brutality.

The region of Gafsa, located in the south-west of Tunisia and far away from the Tunisia of “comfort and development, which covers the coastal areas”, had been dependent on the mining industry since colonial times (Ayeb 2011: 470). In the aftermath of independence, the four small mining towns (Redeyef, Moularès, M’dhilia, and Métlaoui), created *ex novo* to exploit the richness of the soil, enjoyed full-employment policies thanks to the CPG (Allal 2010: 115). However, this social provision was drastically changed by the implementation of a modernizing plan financed by the World Bank in 1985, which pointed out the need to restructure the enterprise after years of mismanagement and economic difficulties. In turn, this led to a heavy loss of jobs, which declined by about 75 per cent from over 14,000 in the 1980s to around just 5,853 in 2006³⁸ (Gobe 2010a: 4). The lack of other available occupations in a mining region in which agriculture is notoriously arduous for its climate conditions determined the pauperization of large echelons of the population, with unemployment ranging between 20.9 and 38.5 per cent – that is, more than twice the national average – in the four aforementioned mining towns (Beinin 2016: 85). It was not surprising, therefore, that the new recruitment competition announced by the CPG, after six years of no new hiring, was seen by several people in the Gafsa region as an unmissable opportunity. However, the clientelistic and mafia-style way in which the process was conducted, rejecting a previous agreement in which 20 per cent of the new positions should have been reserved for qualified locals or children of former employees disabled or deceased due to work incidents, sparked outrage and protests (Allal 2010: 116).

The length of the confrontation, the large range of differing actions used by demonstrators, and the violent character assumed, from time to time, by the protests were certainly unprecedented for the region. Yet, the 2008 movement did not come from nowhere. In the late

³⁸ Significantly, the number of workers did not immediately decrease after the implementation of the restructuring plan. On the contrary, the CPG employed 16,400 workers in 1996 – that is, more than in the 1980s (Hibou 2015: 305). This means that an acute and rapid decrease in the jobs available took place in less than a decade (from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s).

1990s and in the early 2000s protests about the recruitment procedures were staged, whilst in 2006 and 2007 several sit-ins and protests against unemployment took place in the region (Hibou 2015: 310; Beinin 2016: 85). In a nutshell, the ground had been fully sown in the previous years.

Unemployed graduates were the key instigators of the mobilizations that took place in the mining basin (Gobe 2010a: 2). Indeed, as soon as the results of the recruitment process were made public – on January 5, 2008 – four UDC members occupied the UGTT offices in Redeyef³⁹ (Beinin 2016: 86). In the following days, the movement rapidly grew to high school students, teachers, widows of miners killed in work accidents, and the unemployed, particularly university graduates (Allal 2010: 110). Significantly, at least until the violent crackdown of the regime of the protest movement in April, fully integrated CPG workers scarcely became involved in any of the various mobilizations. According to Gobe (2010a: 6), this was the effect of the relatively privileged position enjoyed by these workers, who were transformed into a working-class aristocracy and therefore remained substantially docile throughout the six months of protest.

Agitations were largely spontaneous in the whole mining basin. The only significant exception was Redeyef where, as early as January 6, five dissident UGTT leaders led by Adnane Hajji, secretary general of the local elementary school teachers' union, formed a negotiating committee⁴⁰ (Beinin 2016: 87). Moreover, the protest movement took advantage of the support of the tiny and illegal PCOT, which immediately provided logistic assistance to protesters and media coverage of the events. In contrast, Tunis-based intellectuals, representatives of the other opposition parties, and NGOs remained largely silent and scarcely involved in the events (Chouikha and Geisser 2010: 419). Even more significantly, at the national level, those federations often seen as militant (such as that of primary and secondary education, of health, or even of the postal service) did not support in any way the protest movement (Gobe 2010a: 18).

After months of peaceful sit-ins, violent demonstrations, and riots in a seemingly endless fluctuation between phases of rising tensions and pauses, the revolt gained momentum on April 4 when students, PCOT members, and others organized a national day of solidarity with the people of the mines. The march held in Tunis not only gave for the first time a national

³⁹ The Union of Unemployed Graduates, which obtained formal recognition only in post-Ben Ali Tunisia, had been established by tens of unemployed graduates of Tunis University to denounce the precariousness of their conditions and the lack of job opportunities in March 2007 (Gobe 2010a: 2). In the following months, several regional and local committees of the UDC throughout the bulk of the Tunisian territory were formed.

⁴⁰ Among the other four members, three were teachers (either in elementary or secondary schools) and one was a nurse.

character to the movement, it also led to the formation of an embryonic cross-class coalition, attracting middle-class opposition elements (Beinin 2016: 87). For the regime this meant that a red line had been passed and political repression began in earnest. Despite this, the movement remained vital for two more months, before retreating under the pressure of a curfew imposed by the army and its almost complete inability to expand beyond the mining region. After six months, three protesters killed, dozens injured, and hundreds arrested, the active movement on the ground was halted (Allal 2010: 107). Nevertheless, what happened (and even more importantly, what did not happen) in Redeyef was crucial to the success of the mass-based revolt that blew up in the neighbouring region of Sidi Bouzid, before spreading nationwide, two years later. The experience of Redeyef taught radical opponents and militant UGTT members a lot about behaviour and organizational structure. Moreover, the emotional and symbolic impact of the 2008 revolt in the mining region was enormous and the process described by several activists as one of “accumulation of social struggles” sped up quickly in the following months (Youssef 2015: 58). As stated by Chouikha and Geisser (2010: 416), in their attempt to grasp the relevance of these events, there was “a before and an after Redeyef”.

4.3 Smugglers, the urban poor, and the farmers

The withdrawal of the state from direct participation in the economy, which was never fully compensated for by the private sector, and the arrival in huge numbers of young graduates on the labour market determined a sharp contraction of wage-work opportunities. As has often been the case in several Third World countries, the main result of this situation was the significant growth of the informal sector, a grey area in which the boundaries between legal and illegal activities are often blurred and porous. In Ben Ali’s Tunisia, particularly in poor and less developed areas, illicit practices became the instrument through which thousands and thousands of people excluded from the ‘economic miracle’ tried to make ends meet. The best-known and rather remunerative – although certainly risky – activity was smuggling with neighbouring countries. Indeed, several legal and illegal products present on the Tunisian market came from Algeria (stolen cars; spare parts; and counterfeit money) and Libya (particularly fuel) (Elbaz 2009: 831). In general, these goods were hauled by young men who often took on huge debt to buy a car and get their activity started (Meddeb 2015). The response of the regime to the development of such practices was voluntarily ambiguous. On

the one hand, prioritizing political stability, it largely accepted them as unavoidable and necessary safety valves to prevent the ‘politicization’ of social discontent. On the other, the regime tried to exploit illegal practices, granting new opportunities of enrichment to well-connected groups. Illicit activities thus became not only a relevant source of profit for members of the administration and security forces involved in corruption and bribery, but also a powerful instrument through which to control potentially destabilizing segments of society. As underlined with regard to tax fraud by Béatrice Hibou (2006b: 191), the existence of an area of illegality enabled the arbitrary intervention of the state, which from time to time cracked down violently on unpermitted traffic. Indulgence and rigour, immunity and repression – everything went together along the frontiers. Evidently, the ‘normalization’ and ‘pacification’ of the process was never fully achieved and the increasing strict control that groups close to political power exercised over this lucrative sector ended up limiting one of the few sources of income of the lower classes (Gana 2012: 203). Not surprisingly, therefore, clashes, conflicts, and even armed confrontations were reported with increasing frequency in newspapers in the pre-uprising period. Whilst these events should not be represented as clear signs of a deep and well-rooted political consciousness of the lower classes, they certainly showed the existence of a widespread disaffection towards the regime, its institutions, and its practices.

In a similar vein, the repeated expressions of popular discontent among densely populated communities on the outskirts of Tunis, as well as among the peripheral areas in the main Tunisian cities, were largely atomized and scattered forms of reaction to the precarious living conditions experienced by people here. Without any embryonic feature of political or even pre-political organization, citizens in poor areas self-organized themselves to have access, for instance, to drinkable water and electricity. Relying on an almost endless array of quasi-legal, partially illegal, and completely illicit acts, the urban poor created a vibrant environment of nearly ‘natural’ resistance to the regime. However, given the aforementioned features, these communities, comprising street vendors, small shop owners, partially employed people, and the unemployed, did not have the structural and organizational power to stage protests, marches, or demonstrations. Marginalized communities violently erupted in ephemeral and short-lived clashes with the police forces, before going rapidly back under the surface of the ‘institutional’ politics. The sedimentation of anti-regime feelings among the poor in the urban environments, something largely unnoticed by scholars and specialists, became suddenly visible during the nights of January 9–11, 2011, when “the police came under attack from

unemployed youth in the streets of Ettadhamen in the Ariana governorate and in the Alintilaka housing project just outside the capital” (Saidani 2012: 51).

Beyond these “practices of everyday life”, a much more political culture of dissent emerged in some mass-based events (Bayat 2010: 11). In particular, football stadiums often gave the opportunity to chant freely against the police, which for many people was synonymous with Ben Ali’s oppressive state, fostering a culture of dissent that travelled from poor urban areas into the popular sectors of the stadium and vice versa (Chomiak 2011: 72). It is not surprising, therefore, that the regime, in its attempt to immunize the urban poor of the main Tunisian cities against the revolutionary fervour that blew from the southern regions, decided to suspend football matches. Unfortunately for Ben Ali, this was not enough.

Not dissimilar to the manifestations of discontent of marginalized and subaltern groups, farmers’ protests had little media coverage, often going simply unnoticed when journalists or observers were not able to report them. Moreover, whilst the structural transformations of the Tunisian countryside, as well as the damaging effects of agribusiness on water resources, local biodiversity, and small farmers, have been analysed in several studies (Radwan, Jamal, and Ghose 1991; Gana and Amrani 2006; Ayeb 2012), the history of the farmers’ struggles in Ben Ali’s Tunisia has yet to be written. Evidently, this does not mean in any way that the Tunisian countryside was peaceful and calm in the 1990s and 2000s. The transfer of farm cooperatives to private companies, the mere threat or the actual attempt to expropriate land, the increasing inability of farmers to repay bank loans, and the absence of water were continuous sources of tensions between farm workers and landowners (Gana 2012: 208). In many areas of the country, farmers protested against the worsening of their living conditions, occupying lands, staging sit-ins, and producing embryonic forms of organizations, mainly sponsored and supported by urban-based solidarity committees. It is a pity that there are no data about the farmers’ struggles against neoliberal policies. To some extent, it can also be hypothesized that this lack of studies and analyses is already a sign of the ‘moderate’ nature of protests in the countryside. Since the transformation of land tenure was less radical in Tunisia than in Egypt, and given that the main beneficiaries of the new course in the Tunisian countryside were not rural elites (as happened, for instance, in Morocco), but an urban bourgeoisie with several other interests beyond the agricultural sector, this is not excessively surprising (Hanieh 2013: 80). At the same time, episodes of vital rural contentious actions were also reported in Tunisia. Significantly, for instance, 20 indebted families in Regueb (Sidi Bouzid governorate), whose assets were liquidated, carried out protests to oppose land

expropriation, demonstrating outside the headquarters of the governorate and staging several sit-ins between June and July 2010 – that is, just six months before Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in front of government buildings in Sidi Bouzid (Gana 2012: 211). Eventually, the police brutally dispersed the protest, which – like many other episodes of this kind – was not successful. However, a long-lasting sedimentation of practices of resistance, culture of dissent, and anti-regime feelings gradually developed in rural Tunisia, where, after all, the soul of the uprising was to be found.

4.4 The pro-democracy movement

In a rather dogmatic assessment released in the late 1990s, a Tunisian activist underlined that since “the fundamentalists are the enemies of human rights. [...] No rights for the enemies of human rights!” (quoted in Tsourapas 2013: 12). Surprisingly or not, the long-lasting distrust between Islamists (in the aforementioned statement represented, in a denigratory way, as fundamentalists) and secularist forces, which was a constant feature of the opposition camp for decades in Tunisia, had largely vanished by the mid-2000s. Needless to say, this does not mean that ideological issues, personal rivalries, and ambiguous stances in relation to the regime's policies were not constant sources of conflicts and rifts in the opposition ranks. To some extent, it can also be stated that the emergence of a truly ‘negative coalition’ in which non-government parties, social forces, and civil society associations combined their strengths against the common enemy – that is, the regime – was never fully achieved in Tunisia. However, moving beyond an abstract and ideal model, it is interesting to note that several opposition forces became increasingly willing to collaborate among themselves, even crossing ideological barriers, throughout the 2000s. This development was the product of several processes that unfolded in the last decade of Ben Ali's power. In particular, the regime's inability to address social and economic injustices, its increasing repressive posture, and the concentration of resources in increasingly small cliques became more and more intolerable in the eyes of secularist groups as soon as the threat of an Islamist takeover disappeared (Perkins 2013: 74). Understanding the development of the pro-democracy movement is therefore crucial for assessing the affirmation and the subsequent relative decline of Political Islam.

In the early 1970s, the Tunisian government – like many others in the region – supported Islamist organizations with no explicit political agenda to counterbalance the overwhelming

dominant position of leftist and Marxist forces in university campuses and intellectual circles (Alexander C. 2010: 50). The violent crackdown of the regime on student unions opened up new outlets for the Islamists on campuses, whilst the repressive measures taken against the UGTT in the aftermath of the 1978 events became an opportunity to erode the union's crucial role as the sole mediator between the regime and the country. Inspired by the Iranian revolution in 1979, professed 'apolitical' Islamist organizations began organizing demonstrations and criticizing the government's secularism. It was in this political environment and in anticipation of the pluralistic legislative elections, which had been announced by Bourguiba, that the *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* (MTI), led by Sheikh Rachid Ghannouchi, took shape. Although it did not receive legal recognition by the government and 61 of its more prominent members, including Ghannouchi, were arrested in the following months, the MTI remained vital and expanded its base on university campuses and in poor neighbourhoods. The 1984 bread riots showed that the regime's campaign against the MTI was not working, thereby inducing the government to reduce the pressure on the MTI in the hope that this would moderate the party. The new freedom galvanized Islamists, who clashed violently with leftist militants on university campuses and tried to promote – albeit without success – a national referendum on the Personnel Status Code, generally seen as one of the most liberal in the Arab world (Angrist 2013: 555; Perkins 2014: 175). At this stage the relationship between the MTI, on the one hand, and women's organizations, non-religious political forces, and secularist middle-class members, on the other, was already seriously compromised. The success of the MTI – shortly before being renamed Ennahda – in the April 1989 elections, when the independent Islamist lists received about 14 per cent of the votes (that is, three times more than all other oppositions together), deepened the concern about an Islamist takeover in the secularist ranks. Therefore, as soon as the regime's repression of Ennahda escalated, activating a spiral of violence that culminated in the assault of three Islamist activists on an RCD office in the Bab Souika quarter of Tunis in February 1991, Ben Ali's anti-Islamist posture gained widespread support throughout the country. The fear of the policies that Ennahda might have implemented once in power was further strengthened by the onset of civil war in Algeria, a long-lasting conflict that implicitly worked for years as a powerful support for the Tunisian regime (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012: 334). "Playing the Islamist card", Ben Ali was not only able to split the opposition, co-opting secularists and preventing the formation of an anti-regime cross-ideological coalition, but he was also able to justify his closure of the Tunisian political arena (Perkins 2013: 58-80).

By the early 2000s, the radical Islamist threat had arguably receded in important respects, both for Tunisia and the region as a whole (Angrist 2013: 555). Ennahda, after more than a decade of ferocious repression, was a party in exile, essentially based in London and Paris without any real organization and structured support on Tunisian soil (Geisser and Gobe 2008: 355). Similarly, other Islamist movements, having failed to dislodge authoritarian governments throughout the ‘Muslim world’, either renounced violence altogether or joined the ranks of international-based terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda. The dismantling of Ennahda’s structures in Tunisia went hand in hand with a profound process of ideological moderation of the party. As early as 1994, the Nationalist Islamic Conference, which met every four years in Beirut and was promoted to facilitate the dialogue between Islamists and moderate leftist groups in the Middle East, was launched by Ennahda (Angrist 2013: 556). In a similar vein, prominent party members in exile in Europe worked to open the party to collaboration and reciprocal influence with other ideological traditions. Ennahda’s moderation and its willingness to collaborate with other forces resulted in increased dialogue among opposition ranks. In 2001, Moncef Marzouki, a long-standing civil activist who had been jailed after contesting the 1994 presidential elections, founded the *Congrès pour la République* (CPR), a liberal party with a strong base of former Islamist militants openly critical of Ben Ali’s regime and in favour of a collaboration with Ennahda, as well as with other Islamist and non-Islamist groups (*Ibid.*: 557). Even more significantly, between the summer of 2004 and the end of 2005, three meetings took place between Ennahda and the party that in Geisser and Gobe’s (2008: 357) words had emerged as “*l’épicentre de l’opposition tunisienne*”, that is, the *Parti Démocratique Progressiste* (PDP) led by the charismatic figure of Néjib Chebbi (Angrist 2013: 557).

Nevertheless, this process of gradual convergence and greater collaboration among opposition forces was anything but linear. On the contrary, critical assessments of the policy of ‘friendship’ towards the Islamists were continuously heard in the secularist camp, especially animated by small post-Stalinist parties, such as Ettajdid. A case in point here is certainly the formation of an electoral alliance among four somewhat left-leaning opposition parties – the PUP, the PSL, the UDU, and the Greens – under the banner of *Rencontre Démocratique* to contest the 2004 elections. This collaboration was initially centred around three main themes: *a)* defending freedom of expression, association, and the press; *b)* institutional reforms, such as the electoral system; and *c)* an amnesty for political prisoners (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012: 335). Quite soon, however, it became clear that the main point of agreement among

these four parties was their strenuous opposition to Political Islam, which was seen as an even worse scenario than Ben Ali's authoritarianism. In the following years, amidst reciprocal accusations of using the bloc to enhance the various parties' own interests, the coalition rapidly disappeared (Alexander C. 2010: 63).

At the same time as the *Rencontre Démocratique* initiative, other political forces were working in the opposite direction, calling for a boycott of the 2004 presidential and parliamentary elections. In particular, the traditionally strongly anti-Islamist PCOT and Ennahda joined forces, for the first time in decades, to protest against the authoritarianism of Ben Ali and his void rhetorical commitment to democracy (Angrist 2013: 557). In a similar significant move, the two most important anti-regime forces among the formally recognized parties – Chebbi's PDP and Marzouki's CPR – agreed to support the unprecedented anti-regime alliance between Marxists and Islamists (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012: 335). It cannot pass unnoticed that the four most representative opposition forces, which were not mere splits of the ruling party or super-personalized forces, but rather enjoyed some degree of popular support, were together in rejecting the democratic farce proposed by the regime. Even more significantly, the long-lasting division between recognized and illegal parties (with the former generally taking part in elections, whilst the latter were forced to boycott them) crumbled blatantly. This was the product of two elements: *a*) the greater authoritarian character that the Tunisian regime assumed in the early 2000s (through the constitutional amendment that made the Tunisian Parliament bicameral, thereby creating an upper chamber full of Ben Ali's courtesans, and the anti-terror law, which increased repression against autonomous political forces); and *b*) the depolarization in the opposition ranks. It was in just such a political environment that the most important initiative of collaboration and bridge-building between the secularist camp and Political Islam unfolded. As is often the case, it was facilitated by the emergence on the political agenda of an external issue (Clark 2010: 104).

In November 2005, the World Summit on the Information Society, a UN-sponsored conference on Internet governance and inequalities in access to digital media, was hosted by Tunisia – that is, one of the less free countries in political terms in the world. To add insult to injury, much-hated Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was invited to take part in the conference. Fearing protests, demonstrations, and sit-ins, the authorities banned any popular activity called by the opposition and the civil forces (Hajji 2006: 3). In response to this unusual – even by the undemocratic Tunisian standards – closure of spaces of disagreement, eight national personalities representing various political parties and ideological traditions

went on a hunger strike on 18 October 2005, barely one month before the start of the Summit. Several of the eight were quietly well-known Islamists, even if none of them were an Ennahda member, whilst the others were secular activists (Angrist 2013: 558). As described by Lutfi Hajji (2006: 4), himself one of the eight, the demands of the strikers focused on three main claims: a) freedom of organization; b) freedom of information and expression; and c) release of political prisoners and adoption of a general amnesty for them. As was easily recognizable, all political demands were liberal and procedural in flavour, while any reference to the social and economic dimensions was completely lacking. The success of the hunger strike, which travelled far beyond the Tunisian borders, and the support that Ennahda, the PCOT, the PDP, and the CPR gave to the initiative, led to the establishment of the “18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedom” in December 2005 (Angrist 2013: 558). The Coalition was animated by a unifying spirit, based on the right to disagree, and built on common political interests instead of ideological slogans (Hajji 2006: 5). The achievements of the *Collectif* were remarkable. Not only were personalistic and ideological divisions overcome through intellectual exchanges and everyday politics, but also thanks to the founders’ hard work, the movement was able to move away from ‘Islamophobia’, a long-lasting cornerstone of Ben Ali’s strategy of *divide et impera*. Moreover, despite several limitations – for instance, the violent repression adopted by the regime against the Coalition, the gradual and somewhat slow-paced finding of consensual agreements, and the critical posture assumed by some of the left and extreme-left parties (Ettajdid, the Democratic Communists, and the Greens) towards what they saw as the ‘Islamist danger’ – the temporal survival of the Coalition was exceptionally long and significant (Hajji 2006: 7; Geisser and Gobe 2008: 355-356; Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012: 338). After nearly five years, in 2010, there was also the publication of a volume entitled *Our Way towards Democracy*, which demonstrated that the principles of democratic government were shared by all parties involved in the Coalition (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012: 337). In sharp contrast to the Egyptian experience, however, where the establishment of a cross-ideological coalition was mainly the product – especially in its early phases – of mass-based mobilizations animated by international crises, such as the Second Palestinian Intifada or the Iraqi War, the 18 October Coalition was, first and foremost, an elitist agreement in which the principal role was played by the historical leadership of legal and illegal parties. Having said that, it should be noted that this gradual process of convergence among ideological traditions often at odds was also inspired by relevant mobilizations within some of those professional groups that had been pillars of the authoritarianism of President Ben Ali for decades. This shows how the narrowing of the

regime bases and the strengthening of the opposition coalition are two closely interrelated processes.

By the mid-2000s, a small group of dissenters had emerged within the Association of Tunisian Journalists (AJT, the French initialism), which, after its establishment in the 1990s, was rapidly turned into a pro-government and docile association. Seeking more political autonomy and criticizing the regime's strict management of the media, some journalists tried to form – under the UGTT's umbrella – a trade union, with the specific aim of defending their freedom of writing and critique. Immediately, the attempt was challenged by the AJT, which, risking losing its monopoly on the category, asked the Interior Ministry about the possibility of being transformed itself into a union (Geisser and Gobe 2008: 360). The countermove, strongly encouraged and supported by the regime, was successful, and the attempt to form a new and independent syndicat never gained momentum. Despite this, it is relevant that at the congress, in which the AJT was de facto transformed into a union in June 2008, members of two independent lists were able to conquer six out of the nine seats in the executive committee. This clearly demonstrated not only the failure of the government to bring the journalist association under control, but also the widespread anti-regime feeling that could be found in a highly sensitive profession, fed up with illiberal and restrictive measures implemented by Ben Ali's government (*Ibid.*: 361).

Two other relevant professional groups emerged even more clearly as crucial constituencies of the opposition to the Tunisian regime throughout the 2000s. As is well known, magistrates and lawyers occupy particularly sensitive positions in authoritarian regimes, given that their main function is to guarantee respect for the rule of law – that is, something that by definition is blurred and ill-defined in such political contexts. It is not surprising therefore that several authoritarian regimes have seen these two professions as critical in many respects. While magistrates are in fact central to putting legal pressure on opposition movements and social groups that seek more autonomy than the regime tolerates, the politicization and radicalization of lawyers might be problematic, especially in the case of trials against well-known anti-regime leaders (Gobe 2010b: 334; Angrist 2013: 553). Certainly, the critical stance assumed in Tunisia by magistrates was not in any way comparable to the long and radical wave of protests and general strikes put forward by lawyers. Nevertheless, it was significant that in late 2004, for the first time in its history, the Association of Tunisian Magistrates, after having elected a President seen as too independent by the regime, adopted a

motion that openly criticized the lack of juridical independence in the country (Angrist 2013: 553).

As stated by Geisser and Gobe (2008: 359), throughout the 2000s the Bar Association was the most resilient professional group to the various attempts led by the regime to depoliticize and normalize it. Several signs of ferment in the lawyer ranks were already discernible in the late 1990s, becoming spectacularly visible in the early phases of the following decade. On April 28, 2000, for instance, after lawyers who were visiting Taoufik Ben Brik (a Tunisian journalist who had started a hunger strike in response to recurrent harassment by the security forces and the regime's refusal to provide him with a passport) were assaulted by plainclothes police officers, a general strike was called by the Bar Association. It was the first time since November 1990 (Gobe 2010b: 339). By acting in defence of civil liberties, lawyers gave a political dimension to the strike, activating a dynamic of confrontation with the regime. This was further strengthened by the election in 2001 of the Arab nationalist Béchir Essid to the helm of the Bar Association, something that rapidly became the classic springboard for new waves of protests. Only two years after the first general strike, in fact, lawyers planned a new great protest. This time the issue at stake was the strong repression used by the regime against the extreme left, particularly towards Hama Hammami, the historical leader of the PCOT. When the defenders of Hammami were attacked by regime-linked forces a general strike was called by the Bar Council on February 7. The protest was a great success, with only 91 lawyers throughout the whole country not going on strike (*Ibid.*). In this climate of increasing mobilization and tension between the Bar Association and the regime, the so-called 'Abbou case' blew up. In anticipation of the arrival of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, on the occasion of the World Summit on the Information Society hosted by Tunisia (see above for a detailed analysis of the event), lawyer and member of the CPR Mohamed Abbou wrote a particularly critical article in which a parallel between Ben Ali and Sharon was drawn. In revenge, he was kidnapped by plainclothes officers and arrested. Lawyers staged an array of protests, which lasted 52 days and attracted international attention (Hajji 2006: 3). What is even more significant, however, is the fact that a committee for the defence of Abbou was formed. It included lawyers from different political traditions – from the extreme left to Political Islam, from liberal members to Arab nationalists. In other words, cross-ideological cooperation was not only found in the establishment of the 18 October Coalition, but was also part of the everyday political struggles against the illiberal and authoritarian measures of Ben Ali's regime (Gobe 2010b: 341). Abbou's sentence to more than three years of prison did not quell the militant character of lawyers, who protested again in May 2006 following the

passing of a law that increased the control of the executive over their profession. To conclude, by the late 2000s, the Bar Association had fully emerged as one of the strongholds of the opposition and was ready to play a pivotal role in the 2010–2011 uprising.

5. The making of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition

In the final stages of the uprising, the Tunisian army decided that the price of keeping the sultan in power was not worth paying for, leaving him naked in front of the angered masses. Certainly, the armed forces' refusal to repress signified the end point of the regime. Rivers of ink have been used to confirm or disconfirm the fact that Ben Ali ordered Army Chief of State, General Rachid Ammar, to fire on the protesters (Brooks 2013; Pachon 2014; Nassif 2015). As stated elsewhere in the chapter, this detail is largely uninfluential. As soon as protests spread nationwide, affecting several social classes and becoming unmanageable for the National Guard, the President was forced to call for the deployment of the army onto the streets. The main aim of this decision was to retake full control of the situation. Whether explicitly ordered or not, the implicit request to the army was absolutely clear: to do whatever was needed to quell protests. In contrast, the military immediately adopted a passive stance, refusing to repress demonstrators, without, however, protecting them from the police's assaults and bullets. This 'neutral' position became something different when the escalation of the conflict between the protesters and the regime was so strong that it raised an either/or alternative – either ferocious and military-led repression of the demonstrators or the downfall of the regime. The refusal of the military to suppress protests meant that the latter scenario became reality.

To explain why the military defected from Ben Ali's regime, several scholars have relied upon the professional argument – developed several decades ago by Huntington (1957) – or on the level of institutionalization of the armed forces – more recently proposed by Bellin (2004). According to Eva Bellin herself (2012: 133-134), for instance:

In Tunisia the decision of the military elite to defect was the least surprising. Tunisia was well known for having a professional army which was small and removed from politics. It was not distinguished from the general population along ethnic or sectarian lines. It was not the beneficiary of economic cronyism with the regime. For these reasons the Tunisian military was less invested in the survival of Ben Ali and his cohort.

In a quite similar vein, Lutterbeck (2011: 21) and Barany (2011: 31) stated that the Tunisian army's decision was mainly the product of a highly professional and largely apolitical force. Without neglecting the relevance of some insights developed by these authors, their explanation is not totally convincing. The problematic aspect here is the precise level of institutionalization or professionalization of the Tunisian armed forces. Since this unusually – at least by regional standards – high level has often been seen as the long-lasting legacy of a largely peaceful process of independence and the effect of Bourguiba's deliberate decision to keep the military small, it means that the level of professionalization has been substantially constant throughout the post-colonial period. Despite this, the failure of the internal security forces to contain the protests led to the military's violent crackdown on protesters three times since the late 1970s –during the general strike of 1978, the bread riots of 1984, and the mining region revolt of 2008. Had the level of professionalization been the only crucial element to promote the defection of the Tunisian armed forces, Ben Ali would have arguably remained the President of the country for longer. Certainly, the comparatively high level of professionalization of the armed forces was a necessary but insufficient condition in itself to explain their decision not to repress the protests⁴¹.

General Ammar was neither an anti-Ben Ali plotter nor a faithful supporter of the uprising. He acted to preserve the integrity of his 'own' institution, avoiding the possibility that this might disintegrate or completely lose legitimacy in the act of repressing a popular uprising. It has often been stated that had Ammar ordered the military to fire on protesters, officers occupying mid-ranking and junior positions would not have complied with the request. To some extent, this means that "even if Ammar had the will to keep Ben Ali in power, he lacked the capacity to do so" (Nassif 2015: 79). This aspect poses a crucial question: why were Ammar's men, who had repressed just two and a half years before the revolt in the mining basin, reluctant to do the same again? As far as this thesis is concerned, the answer lies in the sustained, cross-class, cross-ideological, and geographically widespread coalition that challenged Ben Ali's regime in 2010–2011 (Angrist 2013: 554).

Throughout the first week of the uprising, the centre of gravity of the protest was spatially limited to Sidi Bouzid's governorate, whilst in social terms it was limited to unemployed young Tunisians, local and militant sections of the UGTT led by white-collar state workers,

⁴¹ It goes without saying that armed forces linked to the regime through bonds of sect or ethnicity see the stability of the regime as crucial for their own survival. Under such circumstances, the likelihood of defection in the military's ranks – especially at the top level – is significantly lower.

who had been politicized in the previous decades, and radical anti-Ben Ali middle-class lawyers (Mabrouk 2011: 631-632). This embryonic cross-class coalition, which initially failed to attract other middle-class sectors, industrial workers, and disgruntled businessmen, did not come from nowhere. It was experimented with and moulded in the recent six-month-long popular revolt in the Gafsa basin, which blew up in the first days of January 2008. Reading the whole story with a retrospective lens, it can be stated that the mining people's upheaval set the stage for the subsequent, and this time successful, uprising. On both occasions, the engine of the protests was young unemployed people, sometimes also highly educated, whereas the organizational support was provided by the local UGTT's sections or cells. The 2008 defeat, however, taught something to union members and lawyers – that is, without spreading geographically the likelihood of success for an uprising is virtually nil (Yousfi 2015: 76-78). Working in this direction, the opposition minority within the UGTT organized a gathering in Tunis as early as December 25. This protest was replicated two days later by a sit-in called by the union's regional section of the capital – a first and clear sign of rifts in the chain of command in the UGTT. In a rather similar vein, lawyers staged a widely supported protest against the merciless methods used by the police forces in Tunis on December 28. The new violent intervention by the National Guard and the arrest of two of the most prominent leaders in the lawyers' ranks led to a strong reaction from the Bar Association, which called for nationwide demonstrations a few days later.

In spite of these attempts to reach the capital as soon as possible, the geographical diffusion of the uprising followed a much more linear development, spreading gradually like wildfire from Sidi Bouzid to its neighbouring governorates, and from these to other bordering areas. It is significant to underline that the diffusion of the movement in geographical terms did not go hand in hand with the broadening of its social bases, which remained substantially limited to the three constituencies that had immediately fostered the unfolding of the movement itself – that is, marginalized youth (either employed in the ever-expanding informal sector or totally unemployed), militant white-collar workers, engaged in the UGTT's local cells, and middle-class lawyers (see Table 6).

TABLE 6			
THE GRADUAL FORMATION OF A NATIONWIDE CROSS-CLASS COALITION			
	17 Dec - 2 Jan	3 Jan - 11 Jan	12 Jan - 14 Jan
Geography	Sidi Bouzid and neighbouring villages and towns	Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Kairouan, Kebili, Tozeur, Ben Guerdane	The whole country, in particular Sfax and Tunis
Social Classes	Countryside lumpenprol. White-collar workers Middle-class lawyers	Countryside lumpenprol. White-collar workers Middle-class lawyers	Countryside lumpenprol. White-collar workers Middle-class lawyers marginalized capitalists industrial workers urban middle classes
Source: My own elaboration			

Had the uprising failed to attract other social actors, it would have arguably ebbed in the following days or weeks. However, the late entry of other classes tilted the balance in favour of protesters, who – thanks to the fact that nearly all social sectors and political actors in the country were part of the uprising – could claim to be *the people*, thereby ruling out the possibility of the military’s intervention. This development was favoured by an apparently modest decision taken, on January 11, by the National Administrative Committee of the UGTT, which granted the right to its local and regional sections to organize peaceful protests and strikes (Yousfi 2015: 73). The following day, the strikes organized in Kairouan, Tozeur, and, above all, Sfax marked the point of no return. For the first time since the outbreak of the protest movement, industrial workers acted as a collective actor rather than as mere individuals, whilst lawyers were joined by other middle-class sectors. In addition, capitalists and businessmen also joined the demonstrations, as they were fed up with their marginalization in comparison to the entrepreneurial class of the north-east of the country and protesting against the nepotistic system built around Ben Ali’s family. By January 12 onwards, “the uprising had taken on an expansive cross-class character” (Brooks 2013: 217). As underlined by Zemni (2013: 132), this happened because “as the social movement grew in numbers and power, it became more diverse in composition. In the end the Tunisian revolution was supported by a very broad alliance of different social classes of Tunisian society”. When two days later the same implicit cross-class coalition took shape again – this time in the capital – Ben Ali’s regime was over.

As stated at length in the previous sections, the formation of a broad coalition of nearly all social classes was a gradual and long-lasting process that developed over at least one decade. This was mainly the product of the huge contradictions of an unbalanced model of social and economic development, in which five aspects were crucial: *a)* the concentration of resources and investments in the north-east coastal area to the detriment of the internal parts of the country, which were marginalized even more than they had been in previous decades; *b)* the withdrawal of the state as a mediator of the market imbalances and as a main employer of young graduates; *c)* the establishment of an export-oriented model in which low-skill workers were required by enterprises; *d)* the presence of a relatively highly educated working class, which could not find adequate jobs; *e)* and the increasing sultanistic character assumed by the regime, which concentrated in the presidential family a full third of the economy, penalizing non-well-connected capitalists and newcomer businessmen.

However, focusing simply on social and economic issues would mean missing another important element of the Tunisian uprising – that is, the progressive emergence throughout the 2000s of a political environment in which parties and groups traditionally at odds were much more willing to collaborate among themselves against the common enemy, the regime, than they had been in the recent past (Angrist 2013: 555-559). In particular, the enduring distrust between Political Islam, on the one hand, and leftist and secularist forces, on the other, which had characterized the Tunisian environment since the late 1970s, became less salient in the last decade of Ben Ali's rule. Several elements played a role in this process: *a)* the ebb of the threat of an Islamist takeover and the subsequent political moderation of Ennahda; *b)* the emergence of new liberal and leftist parties prone to collaborating with the Islamists; and *c)* the increasing authoritarian and repressive posture assumed by the regime, which restricted spaces of freedom and the opportunity to co-opt moderate opposition forces. The last aspect was not only, as too often believed by many scholars, a sign of Ben Ali's regime's senility or the product of the erratic posture assumed by Tunisian authoritarianism in the last years. The need to rely heavily on the security apparatuses was the effect of a crumbling legitimacy, a consequence, in turn, of the gradual estrangement of several constituencies that in the previous decades had emerged as key pillars for the regime. In particular, whilst the RCD ruling party was transformed into an empty shell completely subjugated to Ben Ali's will and the government was filled with technocrats who had no link with society, middle-class professionals and women – who had tactically supported the regime fearing an Islamist takeover throughout the 1990s – became critical of the lack of civic

and political freedoms in Ben Ali's Tunisia. Some of these groups emerged as strongholds of the opposition in the 2000s, whereas others assumed a much more silent position. However, when the regime found itself under attack and implicitly turned to its traditional strongholds asking for support, it did not receive any positive reply. This was the product of its previous economic and political decisions as well as the result of the emergence of a pro-democracy movement that, by challenging in liberal terms Ben Ali's authoritarian rule, sowed the seeds of the uprising.

The formation of the 18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedom in December 2005, following the protests during the World Summit on the Information Society hosted by Ben Ali's regime, was by far the most important experience of collaboration among liberals, social democrats, Marxists, and Islamists (Hajji 2006: 3-6). It also reflected the limits of the pro-democracy movement in Tunisia, which remained restricted to middle-class elements, involved mainly 'old' parties and activists, and failed – in sharp contrast to what happened in Egypt – to mobilize masses in the streets. Nevertheless, the unfolding of a pro-democracy movement and the emergence of a spirit of collaboration in the opposition ranks was a necessary condition for the outbreak of the uprising, making possible the establishment of a negative coalition and producing anti-regime collaboration among middle-class professionals. As demonstrated by the lawyers' protest movement, this was critical to allow the politicization and radicalization of a social group that emerged as one of the most vocal opposition forces in the last years of Ben Ali's regime and as a decisive actor for the success of the uprising itself. After all, it should not be forgotten that as long as autocrats are able to keep the opposition environment divided, it is hard to believe that an uprising can succeed in getting rid of an authoritarian regime.

Chapter 4

EGYPT: THE FALL OF THE PHARAOH

1. The uprising

1.1 The cross-ideological roots of the Egyptian uprising

On January 25, 2011, whilst small-to-medium crowds gathered in many Egyptian cities, some fifteen to twenty thousand people marched to Tahrir Square in central Cairo, marking the beginning of the now famous 18 days that led to the downfall of Hosni Mubarak's regime. Protests were called by a heterogeneous amalgam of loosely organized movements and political forces, which opted for a symbolic day to stage their dissent. Just one year before, in fact, the government established a National Police Day to commemorate the Battle of Ismailia on January 25, 1952, when 50 police officers had been killed and 80 injured in clashes against the British troops (Kandil 2014: 12). The establishment of this national holiday was the tangible recognition of the increasingly relevant role of the police apparatuses in Mubarak's era. Yet, it also became an opportunity to recognize that the heroic police of yesterday had gradually transformed itself into a repressive and anti-popular force. The 6 April Movement – a poorly centralized network of forces born in solidarity with a strike organized by textile workers in Mahalla al-Kubra on April 6, 2008 – tried to capitalize on the vast spread of anti-police feeling as early as January 25, 2010. However, just a few hundred activists attended the demonstration staged in Downtown Cairo, which was easily repressed by the security forces. Expectations were not much higher the following year. As stated by an organizer with ElBaradei's campaign, "we went out to protest that day and expected to be arrested in the first ten minutes, just like usual" (*Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2011). Similarly, the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, after protests had begun to sweep Egypt early that day, declared without any hesitation, "our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people" (*Reuters*, January 25, 2011). Actually, the Egyptian regime was not stable; but this was not predictable in advance. On the contrary, it was the sudden change in the balance of resources between rulers and ruled that showed the friable ground on which Mubarak's apparently granitic domination had been established (El-Ghobashy 2012: 22). In other words, a mid-sized demonstration ended up in a full-scale uprising thanks to the transformative role played by the uprising itself, in which a process of self-emancipation and profound radicalization of the masses took shape in a few weeks. The emergence of a 'popular will', which was powerfully synthesized in the refrain chanted in the Egyptian streets, 'the people want the fall of the

regime', was not already present in a static and fixed form before January 25, 2011. On the contrary, it was forged in savage street fighting against the security forces.

As already stated, the fiasco of the 25 January protest in 2010 was not replicated in 2011. Although only probabilistic answers can be provided to explain why this was the case, the generalization and deepening of the popular discontent throughout 2010 is certainly an essential aspect. This was mainly favoured by three events. To begin with, the murder of Khaled Said. Police violence, the use of torture, and the lack of any punishment for guilty officials were nothing new in Egypt. Since the 1990s, however, the sadly well-known cruelty of the police had no longer been reserved for criminals and political activists, but had also reached 'ordinary' citizens. The gradual concentration of several functions under the control of the police, after the implementation of the emergency law as a response to Sadat's assassination in 1981, as well as the ubiquitous role of the coercive apparatuses in Mubarak's regime, brought many Egyptians face to face with the arrogance and violence of the state (El-Dawla 2009: 120-135).

The use of *baltagiya* (thugs) to terrorize citizens and protesters, the arbitrariness of the police violence, and the widespread system of corruption and extorted bribes created a regime of terror, which eventually and paradoxically provided the masses with a sensible target against which they could mobilize (Abdelrahman 2015: 20). Within such a context, the story of Khaled Said became a straightforward and concrete case in point. According to many reports, the 28-year-old man was sitting in an Internet café in Alexandria on June 6, 2010. Apparently without any specific reason, he was approached by two police officers who pushed him out into the street, where he was beaten to death. A few images of Said's mutilated body were posted by his family on the Internet and went viral (Lesch 2012: 37). Arguably, what shocked many middle-class Egyptians most was not the tremendous violence, but the fact that Said was an 'ordinary' man – that is, neither a criminal nor a political activist (Abdelrahman 2015: 46-47). In the months that followed Khaled Said's murder, the Facebook group 'We are all Khaled Said' was able to attract hundreds of thousands of supporters, becoming an important anti-regime voice and calling for protests on the 'Police Day'. A second important factor in the outburst of mass-based protests was the November-December 2010 Parliamentary elections. Like many other authoritarian regimes, Mubarak's government had learned to use elections to boost its internal and external legitimacy, as well as to distribute favours and co-opt strategic economic and political forces (Marfleet 2009: 23). However, after the first two rounds of the 2005 legislative elections, when many Muslim Brotherhood candidates had won

seats running as independents, the ruling elite's obsession with a completely obedient Parliament emerged stronger than ever before. The regime, probably scared by the Muslim Brotherhood's electoral achievements, cracked down violently on opposition forces in the third and final round to prevent an even larger success for the Islamists (Marfleet 2009: 16). From the mid-2000s onwards, therefore, the previous strategy of conceding a controlled and limited space to the expression of opposition in Parliament was completely reversed. Thanks to a complex array of gerrymandering, intimidation, physical violence, detention of opposition activists, and rigging *tout court*, the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) secured 209 out of 211 seats in the first round of voting and controlled 97 per cent of the Parliament at the end of the electoral process in 2010⁴². In contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), by far the biggest opposition force both in the Parliament and in society, lost all but one of its 88 seats (De Smet 2016: 187). As succinctly expressed by an unnamed NDP member, "the stupid part is, we had the opposition inside the Parliament under a covered roof. He [Ahmed Ezz, a rampant tycoon and one of Gamal Mubarak's closest allies] took the opposition into the street" (quoted in Lesch 2012: 24). The arrogant posture assumed by the regime sparked a diffused popular discontent. Huge protests took place in Suez, where on the first day after the elections there was a demonstration of five or six thousand people (De Smet 2015: 303). Moreover, the complete expulsion of opposition forces from the Parliament reinforced the likelihood of a cross-ideological cooperation among political groups that had been at odds for decades. Finally, the Tunisian events that forced President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali to flee the country to Saudi Arabia provided a prestigious example to follow. As testified by the words of many activists, political opponents, and also first-time protesters, many people in Egypt, after the breakdown of the authoritarian regime in Tunisia, started realizing that it was possible to change things through political activism (Beinin 2016: 107; De Smet 2016: 187). Although the 'contagion effect' should not be excessively emphasized, it certainly 'helped' the development of a radical social protest movement. In this regard, it seems significant to note that riot police were forced to suppress a demonstration outside the Tunisian embassy in Cairo, where activists had gathered to sing the Tunisian national anthem as early as January 16 (El-Ghobashy 2012: 26). Egyptian activists were therefore charged by the Tunisian events, but it was the consciousness and practices accumulated by challengers in a decade-long struggle against the regime, as well as the social and political composition of

⁴² It is interesting to compare this result with the percentage of seats conquered by the NDP in the previous elections: 85 per cent in 1984; 78 per cent in 1987; 85 per cent in 1990; 92 per cent in 1995; 85 per cent in 2000; and 73 per cent in 2005.

the forces that called for protests, that determined the blossoming of an uprising without precedents.

Whilst the Tunisian uprising was launched by the establishment of an implicit alliance between disgruntled youth, white-collar workers, and middle-class lawyers, benefitting from the key organizational support provided by the UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail), the Egyptian uprising was built upon the even less structured networks formed by traditionally at odds political forces. In this regard, although only 7 per cent of the roughly 4,500 people injured throughout the uprising held a higher qualification, testifying to the fact that the engine of the revolt has to be found in the lower sectors (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 198), middle-class members were overwhelmingly crucial in planning and staging the initial protests, providing a framework that allowed resource-poor groups in economic, social, and political terms to join in and express their frustration (Hinnebusch 2015b: 209). During the first days of the uprising, when workers acted as mere individuals, slum dwellers employed in the black and informal market hesitated, and small farmers remained absent, it was the middle class who led the way to Tahrir (Kandil 2012: 197). In sharp contrast to Tunisia, where the collaboration between different political traditions merely favoured, without being crucial, the establishment of a cross-class alliance, in Egypt the emergence of a cross-ideological coalition was the *sine qua non* condition for the outbreak of an uprising that in its last stages involved almost all social sectors. Precisely because political activism is often the product of the mobilization of middle-class individuals, the crucial role played by old and new political forces went hand in hand with the relevance of the middle class. In addition, middle-class professional groups that had animated the pro-democracy movement throughout the 2000s (see paragraph 4 in this chapter) were also at the forefront of the protests in the now famous 18 days. Among them, lawyers emerged as the most conflictual category, staging several sit-ins in Alexandria and Qalyubia in the first days of the uprising, which led to dozens of people arrested and, in turn, new protests (El-Ghobashy 2012: 34).

Four main political tendencies prepared the way for the ‘Day of Rage’ on January 25, 2011 (De Smet 2016: 188). The first one consisted of the youth of the Muslim Brotherhood, who joined the demonstrations against the wishes of their organization. Between 15 and 24 January – that is, in the short period that runs from Ben Ali’s downfall and the beginning of protests in Egypt – the group’s leadership issued three statements in escalating tones. However, the organization never openly embraced the call for protest, remaining quite ambiguous about the real involvement of the group (El Houdaiby 2012: 137). The break in the

rigid internal discipline in a group known for its pyramid-shaped structure was the result of several elements. Among these, two were crucial. To begin with, the internal weakness of the MB, in which an intense intellectual and political debate emerged in the aftermath of Mahdi Akef's resignation in mid-2009. His successor, Mohammad Badie, was the first chairman without any direct link to the founder of the organization, and therefore lacked the historical legitimacy of his predecessors (*Ibid.*: 134). Secondly, in the 2000s, whilst an increasingly large distance emerged between the apex of the organization and its youth component, many MB youth members mobilized several times with other young activists of different political tendencies, sharing with them struggles, sufferings, and expectations. It was, therefore, 'normal' for them to take part actively in the opposition meetings that planned the protests, as well as in the uprising. The second tendency was the moderate field, composed of liberals, progressive Islamists, and moderate social democrats. This heterogeneous group was the product of the long cycle of mobilization for political and civil rights throughout the 2000s, when a combative pro-democracy movement emerged in Egypt. During a seemingly sluggish period of this movement, the interest expressed by Mohamed ElBaradei, Nobel Peace laureate and former director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), in running as an independent candidate in the 2011 presidential elections seemed to present an opportunity for revival. In February 2010, a large rally at Cairo international airport was organized to celebrate the return of ElBaradei and, in the subsequent months, the National Association for Change (NAC) was launched (Shehata 2012: 116). This was a broad cross-ideological coalition of opposition and activist groups in itself, including nationalists, liberals, leftists, and Islamists, which collected signatures for legal and constitutional changes (Abdelrahman 2015: 45). The third group was made up of leftist groups and organizations that supported workers and their struggles. Among the latter, the two most popular NGOs were the Center for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS) and the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), whilst the leftist groups included both traditional parties such as Tagammu and the Egyptian Communist Party (ECP), and new Trotskyist forces such as the Revolutionary Socialists (RS) and the Socialist Renewal Current (SRC). Despite the pro-labour stances of these parties, their links and contacts with workers were, when present, feeble. Arguably, RS members were the most active in supporting the development of independent trade unions, helping to ensure sympathetic press coverage of workers' protests through their 'own' journalists and providing rooms for organizing meetings (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 184). Yet, this was never much more than an external support. The fourth tendency was represented by members of loosely organized political groups, based on

horizontal principles and animated by young activists with a heterogeneous political background. Forces such as Kefaya (Enough), Tadamon (Solidarity), and the April 6 Movement were all middle class in nature and largely concentrated in Cairo, with no mass base beyond their narrow support among urban intellectuals and students (Abdelrahman 2015: 39). All in all, and especially considering the last three constituencies, it is hard to disagree with Hazem Kandi (2014: 223) when he states that “the Egyptian opposition on the eve of the revolt was little more than an amalgam of loosely organized platforms with overlapping memberships representing all political affiliations and age groups”. This, in turn, explains why not even the most fervent anti-Mubarak militant could have imagined the impressive showing of anger that took place on January 25.

Despite this, protesters were not able to camp in Tahrir, and by the late evening the square had been completely cleaned up by the security forces. It is significant to note that massive marches also took place in Alexandria, Aswan, Beni Suef, and Mansura, while in Mahalla al-Kubra a Mubarak poster was torn down by the crowd (*The New York Times*, January 25, 2011). In Suez, violent clashes and fierce confrontations erupted between security forces and protesters, resulting in three young men being killed and more than a hundred people injured. Several police stations and the NDP headquarters were repeatedly attacked. In short, the protest movement immediately assumed a national character, spreading throughout the country and challenging the security forces, which could not amass their units in a specific location, as they had done, for instance, during the uprising in Mahalla al-Kubra in April 2008.

1.2 The ideological, but not social, enlargement of the protests

In the early morning of January 26, police forces worked hard to secure Downtown Cairo from another takeover. Despite this, relatively small groups of protesters spontaneously clustered in several parts of the city, before being dispersed by tear gas and rubber bullets (El-Ghobashy 2012: 33). Subsequently, the same protesters regrouped at another location, clashing again with the security forces (De Smet 2016: 190). Demonstrations were also staged in Asyut, Daqahliyah, Port Said, and North Sinai, where the fourth national casualty was reported. Nevertheless, the authorities were largely able to smother the unrest, arresting hundreds and hundreds of protesters. It can be stated that for two long days the fire of the uprising was only kept alive in Suez, where protesters were reported to have thrown petrol

bombs at the office of the NDP, as well as at several government buildings. Moreover, it was in this city that workers made their first appearance as a collective actor. As early as 26 and 27 January, in fact, shipyard workers went on strike in Suez (El-Mahdi 2012: 143). Despite this initial move, until February 6, workers participated in the protests as individuals rather than as a collective force, being outnumbered in the streets by the implicit alliance between disgruntled urban youth and middle-class sectors.

A ‘Day of Rage’ was called on Friday, January 28. This time, however, the four constituencies that had planned protests on the National Police Day were joined by other political groups, determining the establishment of a broad cross-ideological coalition against the regime. After two days of revolt, it can be concluded that a ‘negative coalition’ composed of most of all the main ideological traditions and forces had already taken place. By far the most important move was the Muslim Brotherhood’s decision to be an active participant in the protests. A member of the group’s Executive Bureau and its spokesman, Mohamed Morsi⁴³, stated that the MB would participate in demonstrations after Friday prayers in order to achieve popular demands (*The Guardian’s Live Blog*, January 27, 2011). Other opposition parties – from Tagammu to the Nasserists – made similar statements (El-Ghobashy 2012: 35), whereas Mohamed ElBaradei, going back to Egypt, declared: “I have been out of Egypt because that is the only way I can be heard. I have been totally cut off from the local media when I am there. But I am going back to Cairo, and back onto the streets because, really, there is no choice” (*The Daily Beast*, January 26, 2011)⁴⁴.

Shortly after the end of the noon prayers, almost endless processions of people materialized in every province of Egypt. Extremely violent clashes between protesters and security forces were not only reported in Cairo, but also in Alexandria, Asyut, Beni Suef, Ismailia, Minya, and Port Said (De Smet 2016: 190-191). In the industrial cities of the Nile Delta some of the fiercest confrontations were reported. In Tanta and Kafr al-Dawwar billboards in government buildings were ripped down, in Damietta the NDP building was torched, while in Suez the al-Arbain police station was assaulted, forcing the security forces to leave the city (El-Ghobashy 2012: 35-37). However, the now most famous heroic street battles were fought in Downtown

⁴³ On 30 June 2012, Morsi was the first civilian Egyptian President elected democratically. However, after just one year in office, he was removed by the military coup led by army chief General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and arrested. In June 2016 he was sentenced to life imprisonment, having been found guilty of passing state secrets to Qatar.

⁴⁴ Only Salafist groups and the Coptic Church remained silent or spoke against the protests (El Houdaiby 2012: 137; ElGhatit 2013: 115).

Cairo. In particular, the long-lasting clash on the Qasr al-Nil bridge – the bridge connecting the neighbourhood of Dokki and the governorate of Giza to the centre of Cairo and Tahrir Square – went viral on the Web and became one of the symbols of the Egyptian uprising. Policemen tried to resist the crowd, but eventually – after having been out on the street for four consecutive days, and without food, water, and munitions – they simply gave up and many of them took off their uniforms and deserted (Kandil 2014: 224). For years, if not decades, the Ministry of the Interior had prepared its men to deal with large-scale but short-lived protests, which could be suppressed by sheer weight of numbers (De Smet 2016: 189). This became a tremendous boomerang for the regime when the numbers shifted in favour of the demonstrators. Sometime between 4 and 5 p.m. the police were physically defeated by protesters in Cairo (El-Menawy 2012: 114; Ketchley 2014: 164; De Smet 2016: 191). The Interior Minister, Habib al-Adli, was forced to inform the President that the masses had physically defeated the security forces and that the military had to step in (Kandil 2014: 236).

Rivers of ink have been poured into trying to understand the role and intention of the military. As far as this thesis is concerned, the intervention of the armed forces was not – at least in its first stages – an attempt to take advantage of “a golden opportunity to finally outflank their unruly partners and get back on top” after decades in which the military’s political power had been constantly curtailed (Kandil 2014: 5). Rather, it was a defensive move in response to the meltdown of the internal security forces and political apparatuses alike, which aimed first and foremost to protect the country when all the other state institutions were collapsing (Albrecht and Bishara 2011: 15; Roll 2016: 23). Tanks and military vehicles rolled into the centre of Alexandria, Cairo, and Suez, as well as many other cities, and were largely welcomed by demonstrators, yet the armed forces’ intentions remained ambiguous for days. On the one hand, the military released repeated appeals, which were constantly broadcasted by television channels, to respect the curfew, exhorting people to stay at home⁴⁵; on the other, after President Mubarak had made a ten-minute television appearance, in which he refused to resign but announced the formation of a new cabinet, the military’s position towards the new executive was vague. In particular, it seems that long-lasting Defence Minister, Field Marshal Mohamed Tantawi, refused both the appointment as Prime Minister and Vice-President, whilst he was keen to maintain his office (El-Menawy 2012: 135). This alarmed Mubarak. How stable was the support of the military for his regime? After two days in which the

⁴⁵ Despite the appeals and curfew, demonstrations continued the following day in Alexandria, Cairo, Damanhur, Ismailia, and Suez (*The Guardian Live Blog*, January 29, 2011).

appointment of a new cabinet did not appease the popular anger and relentless protests continued throughout the country, a partial response came from a surprising statement released by the armed forces in the evening of January 31. The military announced that it would not fire upon peaceful protesters, underlining that “freedom of expression through peaceful means is guaranteed” (*The Guardian Live Blog*, January 31, 2011). However, as soon became clear, this did not amount to a provision of military protection against demonstrators. Rather, this simply meant that the armed forces were not willing to do the dirty work to keep Mubarak in power (Brownlee 2012: 145). Due to the sheer strength of the protests, as well as their broad social and political composition, the order to fire on the people would have been hazardous not only for the military’s popular reputation, but also for its internal cohesion, making a rupture in the chain of command and defections highly likely (Nassif 2012: 20). In this regard, the cross-ideological character of a mass-based uprising fostered by the implicit alliance between the urban ‘lumpenproletariat’ and middle-class sectors had already reached an important goal – ruling out intervention by the military. Yet, this was not enough to force Mubarak out of power.

On February 1, the so-called million-people march was planned by the protest movement. Despite the military’s attempt to prevent protesters from reaching Downtown Cairo, closing roads and train services to the capital, as early as 10 a.m. *Al Jazeera* announced that 100,000 demonstrators had already gathered in Tahrir Square (*The Telegraph*, February 1, 2011). Eventually, this number would increase to more than one million people, who occupied the gigantic square and its surrounding areas, providing an extraordinary show of strength. Moreover, massive demonstrations also took place in Alexandria, as well as in many other cities throughout the country.

By excluding the possibility of a direct military intervention, Mubarak’s inner circle had to rely on its own forces alone. It developed an ambitious plan, composed of two main elements. To begin with, in the evening the President addressed the nation for the second time in a few days, recognizing “errors” in the last elections, guaranteeing rapid constitutional changes, and promising that he would not run in new presidential elections (for the whole transcription of the speech, see Korany and El-Mahdi 2012: 305-306). It seems that while Mubarak’s speech did not satisfy the crowd assembled in Tahrir, outside the square reactions were much more positive, providing an unexpected opportunity to the regime to regain control (De Smet 2016: 193). In the first hours of February 2, the uprising reached its lowest point, with the number of protesters in Tahrir having shrunk during the night to less than one thousand people. In

addition, calling for an end to the protests, a military spokesman declared, “your message has arrived, your demands became known [...] You are capable of bringing normal life to Egypt” (*The Guardian Live Blog*, February 2, 2011). The weakening of the protest movement meant that it was time for the regime to strike back. The second part of the plan was based on the attempt to take advantage of the new situation and to shift the balance of power in favour of Mubarak’s government. This was believed feasible thanks to two moves. On the one hand, a counter-uprising mobilization would have smashed the resistance in Tahrir Square. On the other, the ETUF (Egyptian Trade Union Federation) would have mobilized public workers, showing that ‘productive forces’ still backed Mubarak (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 199). The second part of the plan, however, failed miserably. Not only, in fact, did workers not answer the ETUF’s call, but protesters in Tahrir were able to hold the front line, erecting barricades and showing an uncommon resolution. Around midday pro-Mubarak supporters – actually recruited thugs and plainclothes police officers – assaulted anti-regime demonstrators gathered in Downtown Cairo riding horses and camels and holding machetes and knives in their hands. The ‘Battle of the Camel’, as the violent confrontations between the two groups immediately became known, lasted until past midnight, whilst the army stood by and left Mubarak supporters to terrorize protesters with rocks and Molotov cocktails. However, the violent and failed attempt to disperse the demonstrators spurred them on to organize more formally both in Tahrir and in the neighbourhoods, angered as they were against a regime that had lost even its last drop of legitimacy (Carapico 2012: 216-217).

In the following days, people gathered again on a regular basis in Tahrir Square, as well as elsewhere throughout the country, transforming Downtown Cairo into “a city of tents” (Shokr 2012: 42). Nevertheless, Mubarak’s regime was not defeated. Actually, had the uprising failed to attract other social classes beyond the urban poor and middle-class groups, it would arguably have lasted several other days in a limbo situation, before languishing and ebbing. Not surprisingly, many activists started fearing that they would be marginalized if the uprising did not reach workplaces (El-Mahdi 2012: 143). It was precisely the late entry of workers as an organized agent that tilted the balance in favour of the protest movement, forcing the military to take the helm of the political game.

1.3 The paralyzing wave of workers' strikes and the defeat of Mubarak's regime

In the initial phases of the uprising, workers remained largely behind the front line. A crucial element here was the decision taken by the government to close down public enterprises in the attempt to weaken protests. Certainly, this had a tremendous impact on the capacity of the working class to mobilize. In fact, not only was the strongest weapon in the workers' hands – that is, strike action – excluded from their repertoire by default, but the absence of a national organization that could coordinate and lead the action of all public workers meant that, with some partial exceptions, they acted more as individuals rather than as a collective actor (Bishara 2012: 96; De Smet 2015: 346). Significantly, prior to January 25, 2011, only a handful of independent labour organizations (formal or informal) existed, whilst the ETUF, the only recognized labour federation in the country and a long-standing ally of the regime, stood firmly with Mubarak throughout the uprising. In sharp contrast to the UGTT in Tunisia, which was co-opted by the regime at the national level, but was still radical and vital in terms of some of its federations and cells, the ETUF had been gradually transformed into a completely empty shell, making it impossible to use it to organize large-scale mobilizations of rank-and-file workers. It is true that in Tahrir Square on January 30, the meeting among already existing independent unions and representatives of workers from a dozen factory towns determined the birth of the founding committee of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Unions (EFITU), the first independent labour federation in Egypt after more than half a century. However, this was never enough to coordinate the Egyptian working class.

On February 6, public enterprises were reopened after they had been closed down for more than a week. The decision was a mixture of the government's need to do so, and an attempt to show that normalization was on the way. Although a 15 per cent increase in public sector salaries and pensions was announced by the newly appointed government on February 7, an astonishing wave of strikes and labour protests developed immediately. By the end of the week about 300,000 workers all around the country had been involved in one form or another of collective action (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 200). These mobilizations did not necessarily mean that workers endorsed and shared the political message of the uprising (Bishara 2012: 97). However, trying to capitalize on a favourable situation, they were crucial for the success of the protests, breaking what seemed to be a deadlock. In fact, whilst demonstrators were occupying public spaces and the regime was trying to co-opt parts of the protest movement, activists started fearing that they would be marginalized (or even besieged) if the uprising did not spread to other social classes and groups (El-Mahdi 2012: 143). The

traditional strongholds of the working class – from Suez to Mahalla al-Kubra, from Kafr al-Dawwar to Helwan – became therefore the most important allies for an uprising that, up to that moment, had mainly been the product of a middle-class mobilization. Steel and fertilizer workers in Suez immediately occupied their workplaces, while vital Canal activities were disturbed by workers' agitations, including the open-ended strike proclaimed by four subsidiary companies (Beinin 2016: 109). This first wave that developed between February 7 and 8 was immediately followed by an even more radical and widespread one. Thousands of employees of Telecom Egypt asked for the resignation of the top manager and a 10-per cent pay rise (De Smet 2016: 195). The petroleum sector, with the workers' agitation that travelled from Suez to Ismailia, up to Port Said, was completely paralyzed, whilst the strike proclaimed by the Cairo and Alexandria public transport workers made it difficult to get around the two main cities of the country. Likewise, some 8,000 protesters, most of them farmers, set up barricades of flaming palm trees in the southern province of Asyut, blocking the main motorway and railway to Cairo and marking the late entry of farmers into the uprising (*The Guardian Live Blog*, February 9, 2011). Medical doctors joined the fray too, staging sit-ins and protests in front of public hospitals. Even more significantly, military-run factories, which represent a significant, although complicated to assess, part of the Egyptian economy, were in ferment as well. According to Bishara (2012: 97), two military production companies (nos. 63 and 36) went on strike on February 9, and two others (nos. 45 and 54) announced that they would have done the same the following day. The fact that conscripts, who were used as manpower, and normal workers alike broke the strict discipline imposed by the military in its own economic complex was a clear sign that the established procedures and hierarchies were crumbling. In short, this tremendous wave of strikes and protests posed a serious threat to the existing order and made it clear that a solution was needed. Given that talks with some opposition forces by Vice-President Suleiman were close to derailing completely and that Mubarak's attempts to quell the uprising had already failed miserably, the military was 'forced' to assume full control of the situation. As later revealed by a SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) member, "we gave the presidential institution the full opportunity to manage events [...] If it had been able to succeed, nothing would have happened. We would have pulled our people back to the barracks. But they were incapable of responding to the events" (quoted in Brownlee 2012: 149-150). On February 10, whilst hundreds of thousands were gathered again in Tahrir, as well as in many other squares across the country, and strikes broke out almost everywhere, paralyzing Egypt, the SCAF convened for the first time without Mubarak. Issuing its first communiqué and confirming that all the

legitimate demands of the people would be met, the SCAF announced that it would remain in session indefinitely. In what was perceived by some as a ‘soft coup’ and by others as a ‘liberation act’, the general perception that Mubarak’s hours as President were numbered travelled throughout the country (Kandil 2014: 228). Later on, it was announced on television that Mubarak was going to give an important speech that night, among conflicting rumours that his power would be left in the hands of the Vice-President or the army. Expectations were raised to an astonishing high point among Egyptians, but again, after a 14-minute-long discourse, Mubarak just repeated that he would not run in the September elections and that some “powers” would be transferred to Suleiman (for the whole transcription of the speech, see Korany and El-Mahdi 2012: 307-311). Yet, he refused to step down. The popular rage escalated again, and new demonstrations were called for the following day. The planned long march from Tahrir to the presidential palace led by middle-class groups and the irrepressible agitations in workplaces made it clear to the armed forces that they had to act autonomously. On Friday, February 11, shortly after noon, the SCAF issued a second communiqué, in which an end to the state of emergency was announced, constitutional amendments were vowed, and free and fair presidential elections were guaranteed (Brownlee 2012: 151). Mubarak and his family were transferred by helicopter from the presidential palace in Cairo to their compound in Sharm El-Sheik. At 6.00 p.m., Vice-President Omar Suleiman released a 30-second television statement in which he announced that “President Hosni Mubarak has decided to step down from the office of President of the republic and has charged the high council of the armed forces to administer the affairs of the country”. As we know, the reality was different. Mubarak did not agree to leave office, but was actually forced to make that decision. The unmentioned agent was the military, which, calculating the enormous costs and risks of suppressing the unrests, staged a ‘soft coup’ to deflect the growing social soul of a political uprising that had rapidly escalated to an astonishingly high level of social confrontation. As stated by De Smet (2016: 205), “when it became obvious that the masses would not accept an ‘honorary’ exit for the President, Mubarak had to be sacrificed on the altar of the counter-revolution”. The specific way in which the nearly 30 years of Mubarak’s rule ended would affect significantly the Egyptian transition. For the moment, however, streets and squares throughout Egypt were crowded by stunned and jubilant people.

2. The political economy of Egypt's uprising

2.1 Nasser's state capitalism

On July 23, 1952, Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser led eight middle-ranking 'Free Officers' in taking charge of the country and toppling the corrupted and inefficient monarchy. In the following years the intervention was considered by many Egyptians and international observers alike to be a revolution. Yet, it was essentially a military coup with a defensive character, in a period of political chaos and high social mobilization that risked tearing the country apart (El Shafei 1995: 14). The British domination, which started in 1882, determined the imposition of an extroverted economy, in which the alliance among Western capital, the monarchy, and Egyptian landowners produced a limited industrial development, the growth of an impoverished landless class, and the explosion of the urban lumpenproletariat (Hinnebusch 1985: 11). The sharp social polarization of Egyptian society after the end of the Second World War and the growing malaise of the lower classes was worsened by two further elements. First and foremost, the absence of an autonomous national bourgeoisie. The members of the industrial elite came largely from the ranks of the landowning elite, and were therefore unable to break the chains with foreign capital – from which they gained a lot – and foster an accelerated industrialization (Farah 2009: 31). Secondly, the monarchy constantly refused to enlarge the narrow bases of its political support, frustrating middle-class 'counter-elites' – the Muslim Brotherhood, nationalists, secularist leftists – which, at the same time, propelled an acute political crisis that they were incapable of resolving. The popular insurrection of January 25, 1952, in Cairo led to a mass repression of trade union leaders and communist activists, marking the collapse of the monarchical power and opening up a political vacuum that lasted six long months (De Smet 2016: 142). The military's intervention simply filled this vacuum, after none of the civilian political forces had been able to do so (El Shafei 1995: 13). Certainly, the coup was also motivated by much more military corporate interest. The Egyptian army was frustrated for three main reasons: *a*) resentment of humiliation at home (the 1942 incident when King Farouk was forced by British troops to replace a suspected Nazi-leaning government with a British-friendly one) and abroad (the defeat in the 1948 war against Israel); *b*) disappointment with the increased reliance on the military for domestic repression; and *c*) mortification over the attempt of the monarchy to have a greater say in military affairs (Kandil 2014: 10).

The Free Officers, who after having seized power organized themselves into the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), were animated by political eclecticism and the absence of a clear-cut economic ideology (Soliman 1999: 11). Nevertheless, they possessed a set of shared beliefs, goals, and views, animated by the desire to liberate their country from political and economic subordination to the West (Hinnebusch 1985: 14). Such a goal was considered achievable only through a process of modernization and industrialization. Therefore, just three months after their assumption of power, the Free Officers undertook an important land reform with the precise aim of weakening landowners, dismantling the last vestige of feudalism, and transferring capital from the agrarian sector to the industrial one (Soliman 1999: 11; De Smet 2016: 145). By 1980, however, after four land reforms (1952, 1961, 1963, 1969), only 13.9 per cent of cultivated land had been redistributed to 9.6 per cent of agricultural households, thereby testifying to the contradictory nature of a programme that limited rents to seven times the land tax and granted peasants the right to perpetual tenancy, but did not eradicate the economic and political power of landowners and concentrated the benefits of the reforms on middle peasants rather than on small or landless farmers (Hinnebusch 1985: 27; Bush 2009: 53-54). In the industrial sector, the RCC initially tried to protect the interests of private capitals, encouraging domestic and foreign industrial investments (De Smet 2016: 146). Nevertheless, as a result of the exclusion of the bourgeoisie from the political system and its indirect weakening after the land reform, private gross investments declined from LE112 million in 1950 to just LE39 million in 1956 (Farah 2009: 33). After only three years, the Free Officers' political project was already at a standstill: industrialization languished and the military collaboration vowed by the US remained a vague and increasingly unconvincing promise, exposing the Egyptian army to the concrete peril of Israel's military superiority. As brilliantly summarized by Beinín and Lockman (1987: 12):

They [the Free Officers] hoped that by carrying out land reform, restoring order and stability, and encouraging the private sector (as well as foreign investment) they could get the Egyptian economy back on track. The disappointment of their hopes would eventually lead them to more radical structural reforms as they searched for a way out of underdevelopment and dependency that would not require mass mobilization and social upheaval.

The sustained expansion in the global economy in the post-World War II period, the state-led development consensus in economic circles, and the new pragmatic approach adopted by the Soviet Union after Stalin's death towards national liberation movements in the Third World

provided exactly the long-awaited way out (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 38). In September 1955, the famous ‘Czech arms deal’ between Egypt and the Soviet Union was concluded, leading the US to polemically withdraw its offer to help build the High Dam, a massive hydroelectric project near Aswan (Kandil 2014: 45-46). In response to this and as a way of financing the costly project, Nasser announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal in front of a jubilant crowd on July 26, 1956. The decision taken by Egypt convinced three odd partners (France, Israel, and the United Kingdom) to carry out a joint military operation against Nasser’s regime. From a military point of view, the so-called Tripartite Aggression was logically successful, yet an unexpected diplomatic alliance between the US – which was not willing to tolerate the comeback of European imperialisms in the Middle East – and the Soviet Union – which did not accept an assault against a country with which Moscow had started collaborating – halted the military operation (*Ibid.*: 47-49). Nasser’s political triumph was unprecedented, pushing Egypt to embrace anti-imperialist, pan-Arab, and anti-Western stances. The new ‘Arab Socialism’, as constantly evoked by Nasser after the 1956 crucial turning point – and even more in the aftermaths of the first five-year plan in 1959 and the so-called socialist decrees of 1961 – was actually a state capitalism based on import-substitution industrialization policies and characterized by a planned economy, tight control over foreign capitals, partnerships with the USSR, accelerated industrialization, ever-expanding welfare programmes, and overarching control of the state over society. Education expanded at about 8 per cent per year in Nasser’s period and the percentage of poor families decreased drastically, whilst the share of wages in total income increased significantly from 38 per cent in 1950 to 50 per cent in 1968 (Hinnebusch 1985: 26; Farah 2009: 36). By 1967, 90 per cent of the value added in manufacturing establishments had been generated by the public sector, whereas the private sector was left in control of small enterprises and commercial activities (Soliman 1999: 11-12). From 1960 to 1964 industry rose annually at 9 per cent, and total GDP growth reached 5.5 per cent (Farah 2009: 35). Industry’s share of GDP skyrocketed to 19 per cent in 1965 and to 23.2 per cent in 1970. These developments were the product of a large-scale and fully integrated industrial sector based on huge factories in which thousands of workers were concentrated. The establishment of great industrial complexes also favoured the emergence of a strong workers’ militancy, a long-lasting legacy that played a crucial role in fostering the astonishing wave of protests and strikes in the textile sector in the 2000s.

All national classes and groups, excluding only reactionary and foreign-linked elements, were embraced in the historical bloc, which represented the quintessential populist pacts that at that

time spread throughout the Third World and became known in Egypt as the ‘alliance of popular working forces’ (Hinnebusch 1985: 14). Although it was personalistic and bureaucratic, Nasser’s regime also tried to build up a political and institutional infrastructure. A single party, named after the 1962 Arab Socialist Union (ASU), was established. Yet, lacking ideological coherence and organizational structure, it failed to become an effective instrument of mass mobilization and elite recruitment, ending up being mainly a tool of control over society. In sharp contrast to the Eastern bloc, where the ruling party literally ‘occupied’ the state, in Egypt, as well as elsewhere in the Arab world, the leading party never emerged as an autonomous and independent body, remaining always subordinate to the state. The lack of any actual link between the helm of the state and society limited the mobilizing capacity of the regime, and was one of its Achilles’ heels.

More successful, however, was the curtailment of the vibrant labour movement of the 1940s through the establishment of the ETUF in January 1957 – the sole legal and compulsory workers’ organization. Unlike Tunisia, where the labour movement had already organized and institutionalized itself before the achievement of independence, in Egypt the situation was magmatic, favouring therefore the subordination – through a mix of coercion and far-reaching social reforms – of workers to the hegemonic project launched by Nasser on the wave of the Suez crisis. The ETUF remained throughout its history a powerful tool of disciplinary control over the workplaces, being useless for workers’ mobilizations and never becoming visible as an anti-regime force. The corporatist pact granted socio-economic benefits to workers who enjoyed a period of rising wages and an improvement of their living conditions in exchange for their political support for the regime (Bianchi 1986: 431; Goldberg 1992: 154-156). In 1964, for instance, real wages were 68 per cent higher than 14 years before, whilst the number of hours worked per week decreased from 50 to 44 between 1959 and 1964 (Posusney 1993: 90-91). In the bureaucracy, whereas the income of top bureaucrats fell between 10 and 20 per cent from 1952 to 1967, that of minor state employees increased by 85 per cent (Hinnebusch 1985: 27). In addition, the government took on a distributive function, providing basic food items and energy at low prices. However, workers gave away the opportunity to organize autonomously and were reduced to a subaltern position in the Nasserist bloc, dominated by the military, the bureaucracy, and educated middle classes (De Smet 2016: 148). Strikes were criminalized as a potential threat to national production in a period in which the country was supposedly trying to free itself from imperialist domination (Pratt 2001: 112). Benefitting from economic and social rewards and fearing repression, the Egyptian working class remained silent for a while. Nevertheless, by the mid-1960s the import-substitution policies

had already shown their main shortcoming – that is, a crisis in the balance of payment (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 45). Nasser was therefore forced to embark on austerity programmes that devalued the Egyptian currency, increased working hours, and forced down workers' wages. Then, the military intervention in Yemen (1963–1967) and the catastrophic – both in geopolitical and symbolic terms – defeat in the 1967 war against Israel accentuated Egypt's economic and political crisis (Farah 2009: 37).

2.2 From Sadat's *Infitah* to Mubarak's semi-rentier state

The sudden death of Gamal Nasser in 1970 unleashed a power struggle between factions of the dominant political-bureaucratic elites (Farah 2009: 37). In the mid-1960s the structural contradiction of combining high levels of investment and consumption had already emerged (El Shafei 1995: 17). As is well known, the equilibrium of import-substitution industrialization policies is quite precarious and soon needs to be transformed into an export-led growth path in order to avoid a balance-of-payment crisis (De Smet 2016: 159). Moreover, the terrible defeat in the 1967 war against Israel fostered a profound ideological and political disillusionment about the dream of Pan-Arabism and the possibility of achieving the military-led eradication of the Israeli state from Arab soil. By late 1971, Anwar Sadat, who had assumed the office by virtue of his position as number two in Nasser's regime, had fully consolidated his power, eliminating the left-leaning faction led by Ali Sabri and arresting many of its most prominent figures (Hinnebusch 1985: 42-44). Sadat's victory was not only the product of his ability to outmanoeuvre his internal contenders and to win the sympathies of nearly all top-ranking army officers, but also the most logical solution to the saturation of the Nasserist bloc (De Smet 2016: 161). Egypt's state capitalism had an inherent tendency to favour the formation and growth of social classes at odds with the planned economy and the state's direct management of the economy. Among these, there were high-ranking bureaucrats, who started treating the state sector as their own property, commercial capitalists, who emerged in the spaces left open in a relatively free domestic trade, and former ruling rural elite, who maintained significant power in the countryside. Although numerically limited, these social classes possessed a disproportionate amount of power and were crucial in supporting Sadat's faction. In addition, Sadat's move to the 'right' was timely and well framed, given the global shift in economic policy from state-led development to neoliberal policies (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 46).

After the partially successful 1973 war against Israel, when Egypt threw away one of the most impressive military attacks to conduct a ‘limited war’ and obtained a mere diplomatic victory, breaking Israel’s control over Sinai, Sadat enjoyed sufficient legitimacy to promote his own political project (Kandil 2014: 124-140). The policy of *Infitah* (opening) was a sharp U-turn from state capitalism developed in partnership with the Soviet Union to a market economy based on Western support (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 46). The Open Door policy was aimed at liberalizing the economy, shrinking the state’s role in direct participation in, and management of, enterprises, and attracting foreign investment. Therefore, ‘free zones’ were established, long-lasting exemption from taxation was granted to foreign capital, and assurance of a safeguard against nationalizations was issued (Farah 2009: 38). From 1975 to 1985, GDP grew at an astonishing rate of 8 per cent annually. However, this was largely the product of the sharp increase in various forms of unproductive income or rent, fostered by the explosion of hydrocarbon prices throughout the 1970s. Although Egypt as an oil-exporting country never matched the stature of the Gulf monarchies, oil has always been an important determinant in its financial stability (Soliman 2012: 44). Partially, this was related to the contribution of oil exports to its foreign currency reserves. More significantly, the price of oil affected two other important sources of revenue for the Egyptian economy – Suez Canal tolls, which have been largely related to the oil trade, and workers’ remittances, which derived heavily from Gulf hydrocarbon-rich countries. Petroleum exports rose from US\$187 million in 1974 to US\$3,329 million in 1982; Suez Canal revenues increased from US\$85 million in 1975 to US\$909 million in 1982; and workers’ remittances skyrocketed from US\$189 million in 1974 to US\$2,855 million in 1981 (*Ibid.*: 40). At the same time, the attraction of foreign direct investment remained limited. In the period between 1974 and 1982, Egyptian investment accounted for 61 per cent of the total, whereas 23 per cent came from the Arab world and only 16 per cent from Western countries (*Ibid.*: 39). Furthermore, liberalization of the economic sphere went hand in hand with a strong inflation, which averaged 25–30 per cent annually, a partial process of deindustrialization (especially in the late 1970s), and other phenomena that would have become more relevant in the following decades. In particular, it seems interesting to underline two processes: *a*) while the rate of unemployment was almost zero in Nasser’s Egypt (2.2 per cent in 1960), it became a structural element subsequently, reaching 11 per cent in 1986; *b*) informal jobs skyrocketed, emerging as the ‘safety valve’ for those who were not able to find a stable occupation (Kandil 2014: 161; De Smet 2016: 165). Inevitably, the social contrasts, which had already emerged in the last years of Nasser’s regime, developed into a full cycle of class struggle, culminating in the January 1977 bread

riots. A first wave of labour protests took place in 1971 and 1972. Then, after the conclusion of the 1973 war, workers started protesting again against what they perceived as an assault on their rights and concessions that they had gained under Nasser. As insightfully demonstrated by Marsha Pripstein Posusney (1993), workers' protests in the 1970s can be explained through the moral economy approach developed by E. P. Thompson (1971) in his studies on the eighteenth-century English workers' movement. The key aspect here is the presence of an implicit pact between labour and the dominant elite. As long as the latter is willing to fulfil the deal, subaltern classes accept their exploitation. Conversely, the attempt to break the pact is challenged by workers' protests that can be seen as restorative – that is, they aim to resurrect the status quo ante rather than advance new requests and threaten the system. A similar dynamic, as testified to by the chants of the crowd for Nasser, was at stake during the so-called food riots of January 1977. The implementation of IMF-sponsored austerity measures led to the withdrawal of subsidies on basic foodstuffs and the consequent sudden increase in their prices. Beginning as demonstrations by workers in Helwan and students in Cairo, the protests were immediately joined by urban poor in Cairo and other cities, spreading throughout the country (Hinnebusch 1985: 71). The stability of the regime was seriously threatened and Sadat was forced to call in the army to support the police. Although successfully repressed, the riots had major political consequences. First and foremost, the regime's fear of a repetition of the bread riots slowed down the process of economic liberalization, leading to turn towards a rent accumulation and distribution strategy (De Smet 2016: 170). Thanks to the revenues provided – both directly and indirectly – by hydrocarbons, as well as by tourism, US-led aid, and a build-up of public debt to foreign lenders, the regime was able to sustain redistributive policies (Pfeifer 2012: 205). Sadat's economic policies therefore became even more contradictory. For instance, whilst the government paid lip service to the reduction of the role of the state in the economy, public spending soared from 48 per cent of GDP in 1974 to 62 per cent in 1981 (Soliman 2012: 44). This was 'simply' the price that had to be paid for political stability and social peace. Secondly, Sadat's need to satisfy the participatory expectations of his bourgeois constituency and the attempt to provide a safety valve in a period of social transformation brought him to inaugurate the so-called 'multi-party experiment' – that is, the effort to replace the ASU with a party of the right, a government party of the centre, and a party of the left (Hinnebusch 1985: 70-71). The three factions were established in 1975 and the year later transformed into full parties. The 1976 parliamentary elections appeared to be a great success for Sadat. The government party captured 295 out of 360 seats, the 'right' won 15 seats, the 'left' only three, and the rest went

to independent figures. Nevertheless, the political opening encouraged political organization both on the right and the left, resulting in being troublesome to the regime. In particular, the faction of the left, Tagammu, sided with the mass movement after the January 1977 bread riots (De Smet 2016: 166). Therefore, as soon as the regime had weathered the storm, Sadat both reorganized the institutional framework and cracked down violently on opposition forces. The government party, renamed the National Democratic Party (NDP), went under Sadat's direct control, whilst a new centre-left party, the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), was established by moderate figures to co-opt the constituency of the left. At the same time, Tagammu was denounced as a clique of Soviet agents, and the faction of the right, the New Wafd Party, was described as the clan of pre-1952 nostalgic supporters (Hinnebusch 1985: 74). Similarly, the increasing prominent role taken by the Islamists, initially sponsored by Sadat to counterbalance the strength of the left in the universities, alarmed the President, who tried to put a halt to their expansion. In 1981 a wave of arrests swept up the whole ideological spectrum of the Egyptian opposition, Islamists included. Some months later, as an apparent response to the crackdown, Sadat was gunned down by Islamist militants.

After the assassination of Sadat, his Vice-President, Hosni Mubarak, took regular office. The first years of his presidency were characterized by a strict continuation of post-1977 Sadat's economic policies. The semi-rentier economy, largely dependent on non-tax income, inherited by Mubarak was therefore protected and even expanded in the first half of the 1980s. Similarly, overall employment in the public bureaucracy continued to mushroom. By the summer of 1986, 4.8 million Egyptians had found a job in the public sector – that is, almost 10 per cent of the entire population and slightly more than 35 per cent of the labour force (Springboard 1989: 137). Moreover, the process of economic liberalization was partially blocked and a mild return to planned economy was announced in 1982 with the launching of a five-year plan (Soliman 2012: 43). Likewise, the grip on opposition was partially softened. Some political prisoners were released, greater freedom of expression and the press granted, and multi-party representation in Parliament conceded. Evidently, the promulgation of the emergency law in the aftermath of Sadat's assassination clarified that this was all, but a 'democratization from above'. The Muslim Brotherhood remained illegal, elections were strongly manipulated, and 'real' opposition forces strictly controlled and repressed (De Smet 2016: 170). The hybrid regime built by Hosni Mubarak throughout the 1980s remained therefore an "enigma" for many observers at that time (Springboard 1989: 19). Yet, the moment of truth was close at hand.

2.3 Mubarak's new neoliberal order

By the late 1980s, Egypt had become an international mendicant (Soliman 2012: 45). The government budget deficit reached 21 per cent of GDP, inflation peaked at 25 per cent, and the total foreign debt was around US\$50 billion – about 150 per cent of GDP (Beinin 2016: 43). In the last few months of 1987, the Egyptian government announced that it could no longer service its foreign debt and it declared bankruptcy in 1989 (Kandil 2014: 205). In short, the semi-rentier state built up by Anwar Sadat and expanded by Hosni Mubarak was crumbling. There are several reasons for this, but all of them are strictly linked to the sharp fall of those rents that accrued directly in the state's coffers. First and foremost, the collapse of oil prices. By 1986, the contribution of oil exports to Egypt's foreign currency reserves had already declined from 33 per cent to 12.6 per cent, whilst workers' remittances went down from US\$8,884 million in 1987–88 to US\$3,743 million in 1989–90 and Suez Canal tolls shrank significantly in the same period (Farah 2009: 40; Kandil 2014: 204). Secondly, the weakening of the Eastern Bloc and its subsequent collapse decreased the value of Egypt's geopolitical rent (De Smet 2016: 172-173). The new and completely undiscussed supremacy of the United States meant that client countries such as Egypt could be integrated more in the world market, forcing them to open up their economies and introduce neoliberal reforms. Egypt saw, therefore, its international economic support shrinking both in absolute and real terms, whilst the US decided to suspend an aid package worth US\$265 million until Mubarak's regime submitted to IMF-recommended reforms as early as 1986 (Kandil 2014: 204). Finally, the boom in the population, which jumped from around 36 million people in the mid-1970s to more than 50 million people by the end of the 1980s, reduced the importance in relative terms of rents coming from oil, the Suez Canal, workers' remittances, and foreign aid (Soliman 2012: 44).

A completely unexpected way out of this economic and financial standstill was provided by the 1991 Gulf War. The international credibility of George Bush's coalition aimed at liberating Kuwait rested on the participation of other Arab countries. Egypt, because of its historical and geopolitical weight in the Middle East, was the perfect candidate. In return for Egypt's participation in the US-led coalition, Western donors cancelled about half of its foreign debt. Nevertheless, the pact also forced the country to adopt radical economic policies (Kandil 2014: 205). The Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Programme (ERSAP) agreed with the IMF committed Mubarak's regime to a set of macroeconomic and

liberalization measures as prescribed by the new Washington Consensus. The plan aimed to contain and reduce the state deficit and foreign debt by cutting public expenditure; curtailing subsidies on goods and services, including health and education; imposing new taxes; liberalizing agricultural rents; freezing wages; privatizing 314 public enterprises; and implementing a flat tax (De Smet 2016: 173). In the first decade (1991–2001), the ERSAP was successful in reducing the budget deficit from 15.3 per cent to 3 per cent of GDP and in achieving a nearly 6 per cent growth rate in 1999–2000. Nevertheless, this was not the product of IMF-inspired economic reforms. Rather, it was the effect of large amounts of foreign aid (especially at the beginning of the 1990s) provided by the US and of the still relevant role played by rents, from which Egypt derived one-third of its revenues (Farah 2009: 43). In contrast, the expected decline in public investments, which were reduced from 70 per cent of the total in 1982 to 44 per cent in 2002, was not compensated for by the growth of private or foreign investment (Kandil 2014: 206). Not much better, despite the great emphasis placed by the government on it, was the rate of state divestiture. Between 1991 and December 1995, only three companies were fully sold and 16 were partially alienated through the stock market (Pratt 2001: 115). The privatization process sped up between 1996 and 1999 when the government sold its controlling interest in 65 companies and minority interest in 16 other public enterprises (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 51). However, it was only after the appointment of Atef Ebeid's cabinet (1999–2004) and even more after the arrival of Ahmed Nazif's (2004–2011) businessmen government that privatization accelerated markedly. As shown in Table 1, whereas between 1988 and 1999 Egypt's privatization receipts amounted to \$4,172 billion, from 2000 to 2008 they reached \$11,182 billion, making the country the leader in terms of state divestiture across the whole of the Middle East (Hanieh 2013: 49-50). By the end of 2003, 197 out of 314 publicly owned enterprises had already been sold (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 51). However, this was simply the prelude to the sharp acceleration in the privatization process that took shape under Nazif's government, appointed in July 2004. In December 2005, Nazif was charged with forming a second government. This, given the presence of members of the business community at the head of six major ministries (trade and industry, housing, transportation, health, agriculture, and social welfare), became popularly known as the businessmen's government (Farah 2009: 49). In the short period between July 2004 and March 2006, 80 state-owned companies were sold for a total sum of \$9,808 billion – that is, about two times more the value of privatization in the previous 15 years.

TABLE 1											
PRIVATIZATION IN US\$ MILLION, 1988-2008											
	1988-1998	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2000-2008
Egypt	4,172	300	82	0	0	52	2,173	7,583	311	681	11,182

Source: Hanieh (2013: 50)

To make highly centralized public enterprises attractive to potential buyers, two main strategies were adopted. First, the companies were broken into smaller parts in order to create openings for private investors. Second, the number of workers employed in state-owned enterprises listed to be sold was reduced through the implementation of an early retirement programme and by not replacing those who had already left. According to Alexander and Bassiouny (2014: 52), by 2001 the workforce employed in the famous 314 companies targeted by Law 203 had already been reduced by more than half, declining from around one million workers to just 453,000. Moreover, this was also an attempt to disperse the long-lasting tradition of labour militancy that had developed in some of the largest public-sector companies over decades.

The attempt to break down the large-scale, state-owned, and vertically integrated textile production, pioneered in the 1930s and largely developed in Nasser's period, was only partially successful. In 2006, for instance, in 27 giant complexes no fewer than 106,000 workers were employed (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 75). The Misr Spinning and Weaving company in Mahalla al-Kubra with its 24,000 workers – that is, more or less a quarter of all public workers in Egypt's textile sector and the largest factory in the whole of the Middle East – was certainly the symbol of this world. It was precisely in these giant industrial complexes, often threatened by restructuring plans, that the unprecedented wave of strikes and protests in the 2000s took root. The textile and garment sector, although it no longer represented the centrepiece of the Egyptian economy as in the 1960s and 1970s when more than 50 per cent of the total export had been concentrated there, was still – after food manufacturing – the second most important branch of industry. After its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995, Egypt was 'forced' to remove most of the measures protecting its local industries against foreign competitors, determining a sharp reduction in tariffs that went down from the original 40 per cent to about 10 per cent as early as 2005 (Abdelrahman 2015: 10). The Egyptian textile world was heavily affected by this new international competition, suffering the concurrence of cheaper Asian markets. In the short period between 2000 and 2004, sales of clothing by local producers fell by half, whilst

textile and clothing imports grew by around 500 per cent from 2000 to 2008 (Hanieh 2013: 58). As a result some companies started switching towards an export-oriented production. Many of these newly created enterprises were located in special economic zones, often installed in the ‘cities’ built around Cairo in the 1970s and 1980s – for instance, Tenth of Ramadan and Sixth of October – or in geographically strategic places where Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZs) were created – first and foremost, Port Said⁴⁶.

Largely thanks to these new companies the economic growth of the country sped up in the early 2000s, reaching impressive rates of over 7 per cent from 2006 to 2008 (Beinin 2016: 58). In the same period, foreign investment in Egypt tripled (Kandil 2014: 212). Nevertheless, the fact that GDP increased from \$92.4 billion in 2000 to \$187.3 billion in 2009 and the total exchange market capitalization jumped by more than 700 per cent in the 2000–2007 period did not translate into actual improvements in daily life for millions of Egyptians. On the contrary, on the eve of the uprising Egypt was polarized as never before, with a minuscule group of super-rich businessmen at the helm, a relatively affluent 5 per cent of the population, and the rest of society neatly divided between relatively poor people and those fully under the poverty line (*Ibid.*: 208). This scenario was mainly the product of two phenomena. First, the attack on workers’ salaries and living conditions was ruthless. For instance, between 1999 and 2007, garment workers in Egypt experienced a 4 per cent drop in real salaries (Hanieh 2013: 60). A new labour law (Law 12 of 2003) was passed, leading to undermining workers’ right to job stability and protection against unemployment, as well as providing more freedom for employers to dismiss workers as they wished. From 1998 to 2006, the proportion of workers with a proper contract fell from 61.7 to 42 per cent, whilst in the same period the proportion of workers covered by social insurance decreased from 54.1 to 42.3 per cent (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 52-53). The shares of wages and salaries compared to gross domestic product decreased from 49 per cent in 1989 to only 30 per cent in 2005, marking an astonishing moving away of wealth from labour in favour of capital (Farah 2013: 55). Similarly, the share of wages and salaries in government expenditure declined from 26 per cent in 2001 to 18 per cent in 2007, while education spending went down from 7 per cent in 2004 to 5.7 per cent in 2010 (Hanieh 2013: 69). Moreover, only 2 per cent of the state’s budget was allocated to the health system, not only limiting the access to qualified treatments

⁴⁶ The QIZ areas were established for the first time as a special amendment to the US-Israel Free Trade Agreement in 1996, allowing duty-free entrance to Israeli goods in the US market. In December 2004, the QIZ protocol was enlarged to Egypt. According to Ghoneim and Awad (2010: 13), 585 out of 733 Egyptian firms registered in QIZs in 2008 were ‘ready-made garments and textiles’ – that is, about 80 per cent of the total.

for those people who could not afford the high costs of the private sector, but also forcing public-sector doctors to work in several hospitals and private clinics to make ends meet (Lesch 2012: 31).

Second, the retreatment of the state as a direct employer produced a sharp increase in precarious jobs and unemployment *tout court*. In the 2000s, while public employment was more or less stable in terms of total numbers, the labour force jumped from 17 to nearly 27 million people, meaning a severe reduction in available jobs⁴⁷. Public-sector employment, once one of the main underpinnings of Egypt's authoritarian regime, had already declined from more than 35 per cent of the labour force in 1985 to 30 per cent in 2004 (Pfeifer 2012: 207). Given that on the eve of the 2011 uprising the number of employees in the state sector hovered around 6 million people, they represented not much more than 22 per cent of the Egyptian labour force – that is, about half of its weight just 25 years before. The relative reduction in government jobs and the modest increase in employment in the formal private sector (it rose 6 percentage points between 1985 and 2004, reaching 27 per cent of the total) meant that the rate of unemployment (placed at around 10 per cent by government statistics in the period 2000–2011) was much higher. Unofficial estimates put the real unemployment rate at 25–30 per cent, which was largely concentrated among the youth with a higher degree of education (Farah 2013: 55). In addition, precisely because the private sector had no capacity to absorb the millions of new entrants in the labour market, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians joined the ranks of the informal sector (Abdelrahman 2015: 13). Given the intrinsically grey nature of the phenomenon, it is hard, if not impossible, to find precise numbers. According to Kandil (2014: 216), more than three million people – that is, about one-ninth of the total labour force – made ends meet in the underground economy, whilst Pfeifer (2012: 207) states that by 2006 the informal sector had absorbed 75 per cent of the new labour force entrants and accounted for not less than 61 per cent of the actual employment – thereby, putting the unemployment rate at 25 percent, about 12 million workers. It is likely, following the famous Latin saying *in medio stat virtus*, that the number of informal workers in Egypt was somewhere in between these two extremes. Abdelrahman (2015: 13), for instance, concludes that by 2004, 8.2 million workers – many more than the 6.8 million hired by the formal private sector – had found a 'job' in the informal sector. Similarly, the ILO (International Labour Organization) (2012: 4) highlights that in Egypt in 2009 there were 8.2 million people employed in the so-called underground economy,

⁴⁷ It has been calculated that slightly fewer than one million people entered the job market each year in the last decade of Mubarak's power.

representing no less than 50 per cent of non-agricultural employment. As logically expected, the living conditions of those people working in the informal sector were, at the very least, precarious. In the last decade of Mubarak's rule, urban poverty jumped from 9.3 to 11 per cent and the proportion of people living on less than two dollars a day was higher than 40 per cent (Kandil 2014: 216). As already seen in the first paragraph, the disgruntled youth were the engine of the uprising, physically defeating the security forces and providing an unmatched anti-regime fervour. It was the adoption of neoliberal policies that expanded the number of people without a stable occupation in an unprecedented way. However, this was not only the product of industrial restructurings or of state retreatment as employer, but also the effect of the huge process of dispossession that took place in the Egyptian countryside, forcing many former peasants to find a new job in the cities.

In 2010, agriculture accounted for 14 per cent of Egypt's GDP, producing an average of about 10 per cent of the value of exports in the 2005–2009 period (Hanieh 2013: 76). Moreover, 25 per cent of the Egyptian economically active population was occupied in agriculture, which was a significant decline from the 47 per cent in 1985, but still a relevant proportion of the country's workforce. Probably, the often estimated 57 per cent of rural population in Egypt in 2010 is simply the effect of a great underestimation of urbanization, but agriculture and rural life in general remained central features in the country (for an insightful critique of this, see Sims 2010: 28–31). Despite this, the percentage of investment in agriculture constantly declined in the pre-2011 period, shrinking from about 10 per cent in 2003 to just 4 per cent in 2008 (El Nour 2015: 199). This was one of the main effects of the generalized reversal of post-independence land reforms, which brought dispossession, growth of the rural poor, and division once again – as had been the case during the colonial domain – of the agricultural system between an export-oriented and prosperous agribusiness and a poor and underfinanced subsistence farming (Hanieh 2013: 82).

Although the process of 'de-Nasserization' of the Egyptian countryside had already started in 1974, when Sadat issued Law 69 to remove state control over arable land and spoke about an end to the freeze on rents, it was the law entitled 'Reform of the tenancy relationship between owner and tenant' voted in by the Parliament in 1992 that completely transformed the agricultural environment (El Nour 2015: 200). As underlined by Bush (2007: 1604), the first aim of the measures, which became known as Law 96, was to promote "a US farm-type model of extensive capital-intensive agriculture driven by market liberalization, export-led

growth and tenure reforms”. The legislation, after a five-year transition period, became effective from October 1997, leading to the abolition of the state subsidy for agricultural fertilizers, seeds, and pesticides, as well as the privatization of state-owned companies operating in agriculture (El Nour 2015: 200). Moreover, and much more significantly, the law increased rents from seven times the tax applied to agricultural lands to 22 times the tax between 1992 and 1997. After that date, it would be the role of the market to determine the value of the rent. As expected, this led to a sharp increase in rents, which jumped in some specific cases by as much as 400 per cent (Bush 2009: 58). Landlords, accompanied by the security forces, either reclaimed ‘their’ lands or implicitly forced out peasants by asking for unsustainable rents. In this way, the livelihood of some 5 million Egyptians, who were placed at the complete mercy of landowners without any state protection, was sharply affected (Abdelrahman 2015: 14; De Smet 2016: 174). According to El Nour (2015: 200), Law 96 led to the dispossession of around 904,000 tenants, harming no fewer than 431,000 families. After the approval and implementation of Law 96 in 1992, the Egyptian countryside became even more socially unequal. As evidenced by Table 2, in 2010, almost 90 per cent of small farmers held just half of the cultivated land, with an average farm size of around five *feddans*⁴⁸. Moreover, half of them had access to one feddan or less of agricultural land, thereby being forced to retain other work outside the agricultural sector (Ayeb 2012: 77).

TABLE 2							
THE POLARIZATION OF THE COUNTRYSIDE, 1982-2000							
	Total lanholders for area categories (%)				Owned area of total agricultural land (%)		
	1982	1990	2000		1982	1990	2000
Less than 1 feddan	32,5	36,7	43,5		6,3	7,1	8,5
1-2 feddans	25,5	25,0	24,0		13,2	12,9	13,5
2-5 feddans	32,6	29,3	23,5		16,6	16,0	16,0
5-10 feddans	6,8	6,3	6,0		35,2	32,5	28,5
more than 10 feddans	2,6	2,7	3,0		28,7	31,5	33,5
Source: Ayeb (2012: 82)							

The fragmentation of land at the bottom of the social pyramid, with an increase of landholders who owned less than one *feddan* from 36 per cent in 1990 to 43 per cent in 2010, went hand

⁴⁸ A *feddan* is a unit of area equal to 4,200 square metres.

in hand with a process of sharp concentration in a few hands at the top (El Nour 2015: 201). The new rural bourgeoisie concentrated its efforts on production for exports, investing in irrigation, market research, and branding. The attention of landowners was restricted to a handful of crops that were of interest to European markets. In 2009, for instance, the top five food exports (cheese, rice, grapes, potatoes, and oranges) accounted for 38 per cent of all food exports (Hanieh 2013: 86). Moreover, the concentration of market share in a few hands became striking. Three companies controlled more than 50 per cent of the commercial poultry production, whilst 42 per cent of the edible oil market was held by just one producer (*Ibid.*: 92). It is significant that large US and European food companies, as well as Gulf-based groups, started being greatly involved in the Egyptian domestic food market, allying themselves with local landowners. The establishment of this “coalition for dispossession” determined the impoverishment of small farmers (Bush 2011). Between 2000 and 2009, rural poverty grew from 22.1 per cent to 28.9 per cent, with nearly half of the Egyptians living in the countryside having no access to sanitation (Abdelrahman 2015: 14-15). This was, first and foremost, the effect of the mass eviction of tenants – that is, a consequence of Law 96: an anti-popular law challenged, as we will see below, by loosely organized and scarcely coordinated networks.

3. The narrowing of the regime support

After Mubarak’s second television speech on February 1, 2011, the uprising was close to ebbing. The number of protesters gathered in Tahrir shrank to less than 1,000 people during the night and a vast sympathetic feeling towards the ‘old’ President spread throughout the country (De Smet 2016: 193). Exploiting the new favourable situation, the regime tried to rely on its ‘natural’ constituencies – that is, the NDP ruling party and the sole legal trade union federation, the ETUF – to show that a significant proportion of Egyptian society was still on Mubarak’s side. However, whilst the ETUF was not able to mobilize the traditional pro-regime public workers, the NDP’s sit-ins attracted only a handful of sympathizers. It seemed that suddenly there was no one who openly supported a regime that just one week before was described as stable and unbeatable. This astonishing discovery, especially for the regime, was the product of the last two decades of Mubarak’s rule, when changes in the economic structure went hand in hand with a profound reconfiguration of the historical bloc, determining an unprecedented shrinking of the regime support.

In an overly simplistic way, several scholars have simply underlined the increasing repressive posture adopted by the Egyptian regime against those citizens who had dared to contest its authority and policies since the early 1990s. To be clear: this does not mean that repression was not part of the picture. Actually, it was crucial for guaranteeing the political stability of the regime. Since the 1970s, the regime had opted for concentrating the functions of everyday control into the civilian security apparatus led by the Interior Ministry, which became under Mubarak a gigantic bureaucratic empire. In the period 1988–2002, for instance, the Interior Ministry's expenditures went up from 3.5 per cent to almost 6 per cent of GDP, whilst between 1974 and 2002, the police force increased from 150,000 men to more than one million – that is, from 9 to 21 per cent of state employees (Kandil 2014: 194-195). In addition, there were also about 450,000 Central Security Force (CSF) conscripts, who served for three long years in notoriously subhuman conditions and represented the front line in protecting the regime. The CSF, however, was not a professionalized and disciplined force, and was only effective when it acted in great numbers and overran contesters – something that, as we have already seen in the second paragraph of this chapter, was suddenly eclipsed by the mass-based uprising on January 28, 2011. According to De Smet (2016: 177), counting up all the civil security apparatuses, a total of 2 million affiliates could be found, which meant that roughly one in 40 Egyptians was associated with the police in some way. To make things even worse, starting from the 1984 elections, the police hired petty criminals (*baltagiya*) to intimidate citizens and opponents, eventually transforming itself into a state-affiliated criminal gang that extorted bribes from shopkeepers and small business owners, and arrested people almost at random. According to El-Dawla (2009: 120), there were at least 18,000 prisoners held as 'administrative detainees' in 2008, fostering acute and unheard critiques of several human rights organizations. In short, Egypt was "a state of terror" (Abdelrahman 2015: 16).

However, the fact that behind Mubarak's domination there was something more than just brutal and cruel state violence should not be overlooked. There were sectors, classes, and groups who benefitted from the new economic order and worked hard to protect and reproduce it. If anything, it should be underlined that the new (non)-social pact excluded too many from, and included too few in, the historical bloc, eventually proving itself unsustainable in the medium term. Yet, it is hardly deniable that the new neoliberal policies – as long as the regime survived – were also dependent upon an internal social base, which emerged in the new amalgam of state and private capital (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 53). Senior state officials and high-ranking bureaucrats had for the first time the opportunity

to transform themselves from managers of capital on behalf of the state into direct owners who profited privately from their roles. Similarly, commercial and trade capitalists, who had emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, became in Mubarak's era industrial capitalists, taking advantage of the process of privatization. It was therefore simply logical that these two echelons of internal bourgeoisie supported neoliberal policies. The new historical bloc, which was also composed of landowners and foreign capital, was tiny from a social point of view and was therefore forced to rely on several institutional actors to build a political and ideological consensus towards measures that were largely unpopular (Hanieh 2013: 65). To pursue this aim the government integrated into its project distinguished university professors, well-known journalists, famous television anchormen, and intellectuals in general. This was possible in two ways. On the one hand, the regime became an integral and crucial actor in the process of rebuilding and refinancing cultural institutions, emerging as one of the chief protectors of non-politicized writers and artists (De Smet 2016: 177). On the other, the internal struggle against the Islamists, which raged in the early 1990s and peaked after the attack in Luxor in 1997, led many secularist, liberal, and leftist middle-class thinkers to tactically – as they loved saying – join forces with the regime in an anti-Islamist alliance⁴⁹.

From a much more political perspective, several pro-market-oriented think tanks were established to support the founding principles of the new economic doctrine. The most famous one was certainly the Egyptian Centre for Economic Studies (ECES). As stated a long time ago by Schattschneider (1935: 288), “new policies create a new politics” and, gradually, the establishment of these institutions went far beyond their initial scopes, emerging as key bodies in directing the action of the government and fruitful points of contact between businessmen and the presidential circle. Power was therefore concentrated behind the political scene, transforming Egypt into what Kazzuha (2013: 32) called an *izba* – that is, ‘a private farm’ where the access was limited to fewer and fewer well-connected people. In this process, the fact that the regime was grooming Mubarak's son, Gamal, to inherit his father's role as President was both an effect and one of its main causes. In 2000, Gamal Mubarak established

⁴⁹ The Islamist attack in Luxor unleashed an array of unpredictable consequences, which actually played a relevant role in the 2011 uprising. In the aftermath of the events, Habib al-Adli was appointed as the head of the Ministry of the Interior, maintaining this position for almost 15 years and becoming the most hated figure in the last years of Mubarak's power. Moreover, facing widespread popular resentment, almost all Islamist organizations condemned the attack and political violence in general. In the early 2000s this favoured a process of partial reconciliation between Islamists and secularists, which became stronger throughout the decade, leading to the development of closer relations and eventually the formation of an implicit cross-ideological coalition.

the Future Generation Foundation (FGF), with the precise aim of promoting himself as a new political leader, whilst in 2002 he created, and became the chair of, a new political body within the NDP – the Policies Committee. According to Kandil (2014: 209), this was rapidly transformed into the beating heart of the ruling party and the grip on power of the new tycoons became overwhelmingly clear after the appointment of Nazif's cabinet in 2004, which was – as we have already seen – full of Gamal's friends and crony capitalists. To a large extent, it was precisely this attempt to establish new institutional support for the regime that determined the weakening of the former existing pro-regime pillars. The main victim of Gamal Mubarak's project was the NDP, which became politically insignificant and full of technocrats, bureaucrats, and tycoons without any direct link to society. The ruling party in Egypt since Nasser's period was never an actual mobilizing structure with sections and militants. Nevertheless, it was crucial in providing a connection between the state and citizens and in guaranteeing a link to the regime. Even more, it was a channel of social mobility for tens of thousands of Egyptians. The political marginalization of the NDP, which was outclassed by the Policies Committee and by even more hidden circles, and its gradual transformation in a restricted enclave of businessmen and of wealthy classes, weakened its social and political role. One of the most interesting processes in this regard was certainly the so-called 'bourgeoisification' of the NDP. As shown by Table 3, NDP businessmen were able to double their share of parliamentary seats between 1995 and 2000, when they increased from 37 (8 per cent of the total) to 77 (17 per cent of the total) (*Ibid.*: 210). Even more significantly, they reached the new highest level of 22 per cent in 2005, before jumping to an astonishing 35 per cent in 2010 (Soliman 2012: 57-58). This development helps explain why, when Mubarak's regime tried to mobilize the NDP's structures, it did not receive a positive reply. The ruling party had been transformed into an empty shell.

TABLE 3			
THE 'BOURGEOISIFICATION' OF THE NDP, 1995-2010			
Year	NDP businessmen in Parliament	Total number of seats	%
1995	37	454	8
2000	77	454	17
2005	100	454	22
2010	181	518	35
Source: My own elaboration			

For about two decades, the combination of ferocious repression, co-opting of middle-class intellectuals, and material benefits for numerically tiny but disproportionately powerful segments of society worked well in guaranteeing the stability of the regime. However, as time went by, increasingly larger sectors were sidelined, eventually determining that the social and political bases of the regime became too restricted to support it.

It is interesting to point out that in the last years of Mubarak's power some 'natural constituencies' of the regime – the NDP ruling party, small and medium-sized entrepreneurs, and middle-class professionals – became alienated, emerging sometimes as critical opponents⁵⁰. The transformation of the NDP into a dead body has already been described at length. Not less surprising at a first glance is the marginalization of small and medium-sized businessmen. After all, neoliberal policies are supposed to be in favour of entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, the privatization process in Egypt did not favour the wealthy classes in general, but, being characterized by extremely high levels of corruption and nepotism, only businessmen with connections with the presidential entourage, key government officials, and central bank personnel could take advantage of the market opening. Egypt's economy thus became dominated by a 'network of privilege'. According to Kandil (2014: 208), the Egyptian economy was led by fewer than two dozen families, whilst Sfakianakis (quoted in Abdelrahman (2015: 10) enlarged, so to speak, the group by listing 32 businessmen, whom he terms 'whales of the Nile'. In the crucial steel and iron market, all the production was concentrated in 22 companies, and just three of these controlled almost 90 per cent of the total production (Abdelrahman 2015: 10). By 2004, Ahmed Ezz, who just owned two small iron and ceramics factories in 1996, had become the third-richest man in Egypt, monopolizing the iron and steel market as a result of the purchase, almost for free and without auction, of the biggest state-owned enterprise in the sector (Kandil 2014: 214). International firms, Gulf-based companies, and joint partnerships between local and foreign capital took a prominent position in Egypt's economy too (Hanieh 2013: 52). By the end of 2010, cement production – a particularly sensitive sector, given the endless expansion of the Egyptian urban environment towards the desert – was dominated by just four multinational companies (Lafarge, Italcementi, Cemex, and Seymour), which controlled no less than 90 per cent of the total cement production (Abdelrahman 2015: 10). As clearly demonstrated by these data – just the tip of the iceberg – the robust process of privatization that took root in Egypt did not lead to a free and competing market. On the contrary, small and medium-sized entrepreneurs were

⁵⁰ Lawyers' and judges' mobilizations are analysed in the next paragraph, specifically in the section dedicated to the pro-democracy movement.

penalized by the removal of custom barriers, as well as being marginalized by a process of privatization that just favoured a few dozen tycoons.

The ‘bourgeoisification’ of the NDP went hand in hand with the purge of any real opposition force from the Egyptian Parliament. Since 1976, when multi-party legislative elections had been introduced by Sadat, continuous ups and downs in the degree of electoral fairness were the norm, within a context that, however, was never semi-democratic, let alone democratic *tout court*. As underlined by El-Ghobashy (2012: 133), increased repression and immunization of the legislature from bottom-up demands of representation peaked at times of economic restructuring, geopolitical realignments, and widespread social ferments. Perhaps paradoxically, given what several political scientists would prescribe, the Egyptian regime chose to close off the channels of discontent rather than absorb grievances and malaise, leading to the vast spread of fraud and misrepresentation in the 2010 electoral contests, described by many moderate analysts as ‘the worst elections in Egypt’s history’. The NDP secured the astonishing rate of 93.3 per cent of the seats, whereas the Muslim Brotherhood lost overnight all its 88 representatives, apart from one. Excluding independents and political parties with just one MP, opposition was concentrated in Tagammu (5 seats) – a centre-left party⁵¹ – and in the New Wafd Party (6 seats) – a national liberal formation (Table 4) (De Smet 2016: 171). In other words, whilst the perfect storm was roaring outside, the Parliament was the clean and orderly house of a regime that had already alienated the bulk of the Egyptian society. This process strongly favoured the coming together of almost all political traditions against the regime, becoming an extraordinary springboard for the establishment of a ‘negative coalition’. After all, while playing the regime’s game and being loyal may be of some value for opposition groups when there are political and social rewards granted by those in power, it is a much more illogical practice in an extremely close political environment.

⁵¹ In the last years of Sadat’s presidency, Tagammu conducted a fierce struggle against the regime, recruiting between 125,000 and 160,000 members, before losing any vestige of legitimacy in the 1980s and even more in the following decade when it supported Mubarak in his anti-Islamist crusade.

TABLE 4										
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN MUBARAK'S EGYPT, 1984-2010										
Year	NDP + Inds (% of the total)	Soc. Labour Party	Soc. Liberal Party	MB*	New Wafd Party	Tagammu	Nasserist Party	Other Parties	Indep., non- elected members	Total Seats**
1984	391 (85,4%)	4			58	1			4	458
1987	359 (78,4%)		57		34				8	458
1990	386 (85,0%)					5			63	454
1995	417 (91,9%)	1		1	6	5	1	1	22	454
2000	388 (85,4%)			17	7	6	3	1	32	454
2005	330 (72,7%)			88	6	2		1	27	454
2010	473 (91,3%)			1	6	5		4	29	518
Notes: The MB coalesced with the Soc. Lab. Party and the Soc. Lib. Party in 1984 and with the New Wafd in 1987										
*The MB was never legally recognized, being forced to either ally with other parties or run its candidates as indep.										
**7 seats were left vacant in 1990; 2 in 2000; and 10 in 2010. Thus the NDP controlled over 93% of seats in 2010										
Source: IPO										

In conclusion, it is worth saying a few words about the role of the armed forces in Mubarak's Egypt. After the tragic defeat in the 1967 war against Israel, the balance of power within the coercive apparatuses started moving from the Ministry of Defence to the Ministry of the Interior (Kandil 2014: 91-92). The gradual depoliticization of the armed forces and their retreat to the barracks was compensated for with economic rewards, pushing them behind the front line of everyday politics. Under the charismatic leadership of Major General Abd al-Halim Abu Ghazala, the economic empire of the military developed enormously. By 1984, for instance, Egypt had attained self-sufficiency in the manufacture of small arms, exporting large amounts of weapons to Third World and African countries (Abdelrahman 2015: 21-22). Even more significantly, from the 1970s onwards, the military's production reached several civilian sectors – for instance, manufacturing, construction, and service activities. After the military had suppressed the CSF conscripts mutiny in February 1986, they retreated from the political scene and evolved into an autonomous middle-class entity with an industrial base. The actual relevance of the latter, given the notorious secrecy of the military's affairs, was a constant issue of sharp debate, with estimates ranging from a modest 5 per cent of the total national economy up to an astonishing 40 per cent. According to Kandil (2014: 181-193), on the other hand, the economic privileges of the Egyptian army were largely a myth. The famous \$1.3 billion provided by the United States since 1979 depreciated in real terms by more than 50 per cent over three decades, whilst the military spending, which represented 19.5 per cent of Egypt's GDP in 1980, was just 2.2 per cent in 2010. Moreover, political and geopolitical concerns in the highest ranks of the armed forces were said to exist too. Among these, the

increasingly prominent role of the police, the emergence of an arrogant and super-powerful clique of crony capitalists directly linked to Gamal Mubarak, the US-imposed military semi-desertification of the Sinai, and the weak role of the Arab armies in comparison to Israel can be pointed out. Hazem Kandil, in his otherwise excellent *Soldiers, Spies, and Statesmen* (2014), reporting at length on the junior role of the military in Mubarak's Egypt, states that "once the people took to the streets, it was only natural for officers to rally to their side" (*Ibid.*: 5). Certainly, the military was neither the leading political actor on the eve of the uprising nor the greatest winner in the process of neoliberal restructuring. However, the armed forces were a crucial actor in the reproduction of the regime and the order it had created (Abdelrahman 2015: 26). Three aspects have to be taken into account here. As an institution, the military enjoyed some important privileges, with its economic activities completely shrouded in secrecy, total exemption from taxes, and the opportunity to use poorly paid conscripts, who made between \$17 and \$28 a month, as a workforce (Awad 2012). Moreover, the impressive penetration of society through their economic activities allowed the armed forces to touch directly the lives of almost all Egyptians. As stated by Abul-Magd (2011):

The military's economic interests encompass a diverse range of revenue-generating activities, including the selling and buying of real estate on behalf of the government, domestic cleaning services, running cafeterias, managing gas stations, farming livestock, producing food products, and manufacturing plastic table covers.

Finally, as illustrated by a couple of illuminating studies, military elite secured post-retirement political appointments, especially in local and regional authorities, and pharaonic economic rewards, thereby being incorporated in Mubarak's crony system (Sayigh 2012; Nassif 2013). Underlining these elements does not mean that the army was a monolithic bloc in full support of Mubarak's regime. Resentments might have been present in the armed forces, especially in mid-ranking and junior officials, whose monthly wages ranged from \$333 to \$414, roughly the equivalent of a Cairo taxi driver's income (Nassif 2012: 20). The patronage system developed by Mubarak was biased to conquer the loyalty of the upper echelons of the military and was not at all generous with mid-ranking officials, let alone with rank-and-file soldiers. Nevertheless, whilst the latter two layers of the armed forces lacked the political, social, and logistical strength to carry out autonomous action, the high-ranking officials were loyal to Mubarak and not at all interested in removing him from power. If they

opted for not repressing the uprising and then ‘fired’ Mubarak it was simply because “officers issue orders, but subordinates execute them” (*Ibid.*). In other words, knowing the widespread anti-Mubarak feeling among their troops and evaluating the presence of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition in the streets, which claimed to be *the people* and immediately fraternized with soldiers, the generals chose to remove Mubarak rather than deal with a mutiny in their ranks. To some extent, it can be stated that the regime was the victim of an extremely limited support that spanned from civilian allies to military ranks – a sandcastle too brittle to remain standing.

4. The long way to Tahrir

4.1 Egyptian workers in revolt⁵²

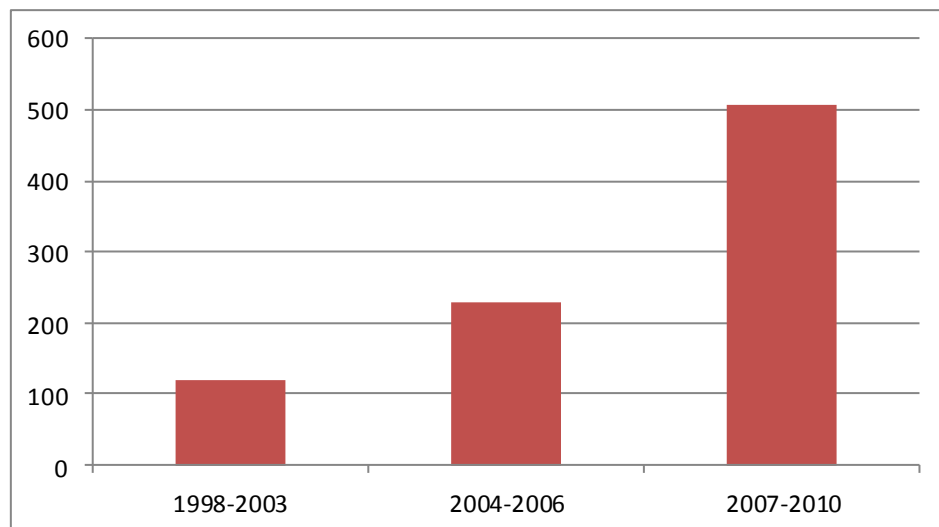
Workers’ adaptation to the new social and political scenario imposed by the neoliberal restructuring was initially slow and throughout the 1990s their actions were still inspired by the moral economy principles (Pratt 2001: 115-119). However, as soon as the assault on workers’ living conditions became more acute, a strong reaction developed, leading to the unfolding of “the longest and strongest wave of worker protest since the late 1940s” (Beinin 2012: 92). This unprecedented mobilization was the most serious threat to Mubarak’s rule in the last decade of his regime, forcing authorities to deal with workers’ requests, and inspiring other social classes to take to the street and challenge the regime. A crucial turning point in workers’ agitations was the strike at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in the Delta town of Mahalla al-Kubra in December 2006 (El-Mahdi 2011: 397-398). Although this should not be interpreted as the beginning of the protest wave, there has certainly been a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ Mahalla. There are several reasons for this. First and foremost, the mere numerical weight of this gigantic industrial complex, where about 24,000 workers were concentrated in the 2000s. Second, the symbolic centrality of this factory throughout Egyptian modern history. Indeed, since it was established in 1927, the Misr has been the beating heart of the country. In September–October 1947, for instance, a ferocious strike demanding an independent trade union blew up there, marking a qualitative shift in the long cycle of contention that eventually led to the 1952 military coup, whilst in 1960, not surprisingly, the

⁵² For a detailed analysis of the role played by Egyptian workers in Mubarak’s ouster, see also Del Panta (2016).

Misr was the first important firm to be nationalized by Nasser's regime after the so-called Arab socialism had been embraced (Beinin and El-Hamalawy 2007). Finally, Mahalla's events played a "transformative role" in workers' actions, leading to their intensification and radicalization (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 101). The protests in Mahalla erupted as a response to unmet promises. In March 2006, in fact, Prime Minister Nazif announced an increase in the annual bonus given to all public workers from LE100 to two months' salary. However, when December came – that is, the month when the bonus was paid – workers found the same old 100 pounds. Actually, to be more precise, just LE89 because there were deductions for taxes and social benefits. In response to their ill-treatment and feeling of having been cheated, workers halted production and occupied the factory. After four days, a 45-day bonus, assurances that the factory would not be privatized, and a promise that in the case of profits higher than LE60 million, 10 per cent of these would be distributed to workers were granted by the government (Beinin 2016: 75-76). This victory galvanized workers in the textile sector and in the following months about 30,000 of them in a dozen mills in the Nile Delta and Alexandria took part in several different forms of protest (Beinin and El-Hamalawy 2007). In January 2007, a hunger strike was carried out by drivers of railway engines, whilst in February 11,000 workers at the Kafr al-Dawwar Fine Spinning and Weaving Company staged a massive protest (Abdelrahman 2012: 617). Moreover, these agitations were characterized by different features compared to what had happened in the recent past. Strikes were replaced by occupation of factories during which production was maintained and even increased; protests were longer and generally ended peacefully through direct negotiation; workers' requests were replicated in different economic sectors, becoming widespread; and new demands – from the establishment of new independent trade unions to the sacking of company management – were raised (El-Mahdi 2011: 392). The December 2006 strike at the Misr in Mahalla was therefore critical for the development of a strong and conflictual labour movement. Yet, a sharp acceleration in the number of protests had already taken place in the previous period. As shown by Table 5, and even more explicitly by Graph 1, from 1998 to 2003 there was an average of 118 contentious collective actions per year, marking a significant increase compared to the early 1990s. Then, in 2004 alone – the year in which Nazif's businessmen government was appointed – there were 265 episodes of workers' disturbances.

TABLE 5				
COLLECTIVE LABOUR ACTIONS AND NUMBER OF WORKERS INVOLVED, 1998-2010				
Year	Number of Actions	Alternative Number of Actions		Workers Involved
1998	114		115**	
1999	164			
2000	135	102*		
2001	115	132*	138**	
2002	96			
2003	86			
2004	266			386,346
2005	202			141,175
2006	222			198,088
2007	614	692*		474,838
2008	609	447*		541,423
2009	432	478*		
2010	371	530*	530**	

Sources: Beinin (2016: 66); * Abdelrahman (2015: 57); ** Alexander and Bassiouny (2014: 108)



Graph 1: Episodes of workers' collective action, 1998–2010 (yearly averages)

In addition, not only did workers' actions skyrocket in number and assume a more militant character, but they also spread to the private sector, which until 2004 had remained substantially untouched (Table 6) (Alexander A. 2010: 247). The process of privatization under the market price of the ESCO Spinning Company in Qalyub, for instance, determined two waves of workers' protests, which did not halt the process, but forced the government to take full responsibility even though it had already sold the enterprise (Beinin 2012: 191-192).

Similarly, the collective action at the Ora-Misr was another significant turning point. Not only was this manufactured building materials factory located in 10th of Ramadan City – one of the new satellite cities in which labour militancy was practically unknown – but also for the first time workers chose as the stage of their protest a public space, probably taking inspiration from the pro-democracy movement that since the outburst of the second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000 had constantly tried to cross this red line for the Egyptian regime. After asbestos had been used in the production for over 20 years and 18 workers had died from lung cancer between 1997 and 2004, the Ora-Misr was closed down under international pressure. The company, although forced by the government to pay compensation to dead workers' families, refused to do so, leading to a collective strong reaction and the establishment of an encampment outside the factory that lasted for over nine months (Beinin 2013: 195-196).

TABLE 6					
NUMBER OF CONTENTIOUS ACTIONS BY OWNERSHIP SECTOR, 2006-2010					
Sector/Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Public sector	156	400	374	272	200
Private sector	66	214	235	160	171
Total	222	614	609	432	371
Private sector action as % of total actions	29,7	34,8	38,5	37,0	46,1
Sources: 2006-2008 El-Mahdi (2011: 393); 2009-2010 Beinin (2016: 68)					

Coming back to Mahalla, the December 2006 strike did not wear out workers' protests. On the contrary, in the wake of the astonishing success that was achieved, the elected strike committee launched a campaign to impeach the official local union committee, which was accused of being supportive of the regime rather than of workers' demands. Thirteen thousand employees signed a petition asking for new elections after the previous ones in 2006 had been characterized by fraud and misrepresentation, while 3,000 workers resigned, committing an illegal act, from the ETUF. These measures were not accepted by the ETUF and therefore remained ineffective. Nevertheless, Mahalla's militant spirit erupted again in a new strike in September 2007, when the promises made at the end of the previous agitation about the payment of an extra bonus in the case of great profits went unmet once more. The strike lasted six days and resulted in a new and complete victory for workers, who, apart from new economic gains, obtained the dismissal of hated CEO Mahmud al-Gibali and forced ETUF

President, Hussein Megawer, to negotiate with the strike committee (Beinin 2016: 77-78). The success of September 2007 encouraged workers in Mahalla, who tried to move on from demands restricted to their own workplace to more general concerns. A national labour strike day in the textile sector was therefore proposed for April 6, 2008, in order to advance the request for raising the monthly minimum wage to LE1,200 (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 120). The effort was huge, but the national strike was a fiasco. Not only, in fact, was the coordination among Delta area workers too feeble to self-organize a similar protest, but also the regime's response was ruthless, deeming the link between labour grievances and national mobilization an impassable red line. A few days before the planned protest, the factory was preventively occupied by security forces, whilst social benefits and free transportation to and from work were promised by the government. The strategy of 'the carrot and the stick' was successful, and on April 6 in Mahalla, as well as elsewhere in the Nile Delta, workers remained silent. However, the city was rocked by two days of furious confrontation between demonstrators, who protested against the high prices of unsubsidized food items and trampled on portraits of Mubarak, and security forces. Due to its geographical narrowness and its inability to reach other social classes beyond the disgruntled youth, the uprising was eventually defeated by the exceptionally high level of security forces deployed on the ground, leading also to the tragic death of a 15-year-old boy who was shot dead by the police. The level of repression in the aftermath of the Mahalla events was extraordinary too: 331 people were arrested, nine seriously wounded, several workers transferred, and 22 of them sentenced to three- to five-year jail terms. (Beinin 2013: 199). Nevertheless, for the first time an implicit alliance between middle-class and urban elements, who provided the political framework for protests, and disenfranchised youth, who emerged as unknown soldiers, was forged. It was to become, just two and a half years later, the engine of the uprising that defeated Mubarak's regime.

The failure to stage a national strike was certainly a negative blow for Egyptian workers, who, however, through their direct and indirect action, posed a new and serious threat to the regime. In the 2000s, workers' mobilizations were mainly carried out through the establishment of strike committees elected by workers themselves. This was not only an effect of the complete co-optation by the regime of the ETUF leadership – to a large extent, the situation was not significantly different in Tunisia with the UGTT – but also a consequence of the failure of Egyptian workers to use the lowest levels of the ETUF structures (that is, workplace union committees) to mobilize any of the resources of the federation in their favour

– in sharp contrast, in this regard, to what happened in Tunisia (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 139-142). Recognizing the impossibility of changing the ETUF from below, workers organized themselves outside the state bureaucracy machine, electing autonomously and in a democratic fashion their own representative bodies. Despite this, the lack of a national organization that could have been used as a springboard for launching mobilizations on the workplaces became a tremendous hindrance for workers in the first days of the uprising, when they were forced to act as individuals. The political weight of strike committees always remained limited and they never had any serious chance of staging a national protest of some relevance. At the same time, the transformation of the ETUF into an empty shell was also damaging for the regime, which, while desperately looking for support during the 18 days, discovered that the ETUF was not even able to organize a trivial pro-Mubarak sit-in. Had the union retained some degree of independence, the regime would arguably have found an important ally against the protesters. As we have already seen, however, this was not the case and the hermetic closure of the ETUF to workers' requests and expectations meant that the monopoly of the ETUF on workers was in peril in the late 2000s. In other words, the soil had been ploughed in readiness for the blossoming of the first independent union in Egyptian republican history. Surprisingly, however, this was not the achievement of militant textile workers, but the result of the mobilization of traditionally pro-regime clerical workers. The trigger of protest was a salary disparity between the municipal tax assessors and central government workers. The mobilization started in the autumn of 2007 and gained momentum at the end of the year when an 11-day massive occupation of the street in front of the Ministry of Finance building with more than three thousand workers took place (Beinin 2012: 103). Eventually, tax assessors employed by local authorities won an astonishing 325 per cent wage increase, and building on this success the strike committee spent the following year organizing an independent union, which became known as the Real Estate Tax Authorities Union (RETAU). By December 2008, the permanent committee had already recruited nearly 30,000 workers across all 29 Egyptian governorates (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 168). Then, in a completely unexpected move, the Ministry of Manpower and Migration recognized the union in April 2009, ratifying both on symbolic and effective grounds the dismissal of the corporative bargain (El-Mahdi 2011: 392-393). The membership of the RETAU increased again in the following months, and 37,000 out of 52,000 employees became members of the newly established union (Abdelrahman 2015: 61). On the back of this success, workers' mobilizations continued and other independent unions – from the Independent School Teachers' Union to the Health Technicians' Union – were established just a few months

before the outbreak of the uprising. The struggle of postal workers for their own independent union was arguably the most significant. Protesting against low salaries – the 52,000 postal workers in Egypt earned between LE200 and LE800 per month – and asking for permanent contracts for temporary workers, several sit-ins and demonstrations were staged in 2009. These recurrent protests, in turn, led to the establishment of the postal workers' Higher Strike Committee (*Ibid.*: 173-175). Encouraged by this widespread 'effervescence' in several workplaces, on May 1, 2010, several hundred workers and activists staged a protest in front of the People's Assembly demanding the introduction of a new minimum wage of LE1,200. In that year alone, there were no fewer than a dozen gatherings, in which workers' rights and other social demands were raised, in front of the Parliament (Beinin 2016: 99). In the 2000s, therefore, a powerful labour movement emerged in Egypt, challenging Mubarak's neoliberal reforms and the authority of his regime, and paving the way for a mass-based uprising.

4.2 The urban poor's protests

As we have already seen, the withdrawal of the state from managing the economy and being directly involved in providing services determined that millions of Egyptians, who had previously been dependent on state provisions, had to rely on themselves to survive. The growth of marginalized and subaltern groups was formidable in the decade that preceded the uprising, determining the widespread increase in the number of those citizens who worked in the informal sector, or simply did not work at all. Increasingly large echelons of society started struggling to have access to decent educational and health services, drinkable water, a proper sewage system, basic foodstuffs, or a 'basic' shelter. Everywhere, from shanty towns on the outskirts of nearly endless expanding cities to small villages, an incredibly rich array of protests and acts of civil disobediences were carried out by a *melange* of street vendors, partially employed workers, housewives, small shop owners, and taxi and *tuk-tuk* (rickshaw) drivers (De Smet 2016: 185). These actions were spontaneous, daily, leaderless, dispersed, and lacked any embryonic form of organization. In addition, due to their extremely short lifespan, limited number of participants, and unplanned stage, these protests were the least documented among all the contentious actions in Egypt in the 2000s. As underlined by Abdelrahman (2015: 66):

If no journalist, activist, or publicly minded individual happened to be present during the event and managed to report it to independent media or human rights centres involved in the documentation of protest activity, the event was lost to the outside world as most of these protests were spontaneous.

In general, acts of dissent emerged when a group of angry citizens felt humiliated by living with daily injustices and social alienation, often exacerbated by the total breakdown in the provision of basic services – electricity, water, housing, and the like (*Ibid.*: 64). However, rather than flocking to the streets and staging a public protest to demand, for instance, electricity, the urban poor and marginalized simply tapped into the municipal power grid without any authorization and ‘stole’ what they needed from the state (Bayat 2012: 79). This does not mean that in some rare cases, disenfranchised citizens did not protest in much more visible and ‘traditional’ forms. Maha Abdelrahman (2015: 65) reports three interesting examples in this regard. In 2007, around 300 families from the Basatin neighbourhood in Cairo organized a march to contest their eviction from their homes, distributing pamphlets significantly titled ‘A Declaration of War’. Secondly, in January 2008, 400 people who had lived for over 20 years in temporary shelters protested against a partial collapse of their ‘homes’. Thirdly and finally, a demonstration of hundreds of C-virus patients, who were furious about the repeated delays in receiving their needed treatments, took place in front of the largest public hospital in Egypt, located in Cairo, in 2008. Nevertheless, apart from a few rare examples, the bulk of these actions were completely fragmented and did not have the articulated energy of social movements, being part of what Asef Bayat (2010: 56) terms “the quiet encroachment of the ordinary”. This notion described the silent, but continuous action of ordinary people in carving out their own space to survive in an increasingly polarized and socially cruel Egypt. It is interesting to note that the sudden and violent impoverishment of the educated middle classes – state employees, teachers, journalists, and the intelligentsia – expanded the social classes that lived through (almost) illegal activities far beyond the ‘usual’ lumpenproletariat. Schoolteachers, for instance, to compensate for their meagre salaries – according to Alexander and Bassiouny (2014: 70), women’s weekly wage in the educational sector in 2007 was just LE94, that is, almost half of what they could earn in manufacturing – turned to privately paid tutoring of their same pupils, creating a massive sector of illegal private teaching that in the early 2000s generated some LE 12 billion a year (Bayat 2010: 57-58). Too often, acts of dissent by marginalized citizens have been seen by political scientists and militants alike as apolitical actions or mere forms of resistance. However, even if ‘encroachment’ begins with little political flavour, it might rapidly evolve into something

different, with citizens who tend to become aware of their actions and of the value of their achievements. Two key elements demonstrated the political potential of the contentious actions that swept the Egyptian streets in the 2000s: *a*) the use of public spaces (alleyways, pavements, parks, and squares); and *b*) the establishment of ‘passive networks’ (*Ibid.*: 62-63). The latter aspect points to the formation of common identities among isolated individuals, who gradually started feeling part of a ‘community’ in which they shared views, values, struggles, and hopes. Arguably, the presence of ‘passive networks’ was an important element during the 2011 uprising in the establishment of popular committees that took part in the uprising and organized life in the neighbourhoods, protecting people and ensuring normal access to basic social services after the police apparatuses had melted down on January 28.

4.3 Farmers’ struggles, the countryside, and environmental issues

During the five-year transitional period (1992–1997), there was a widespread belief that Law 96 (concerning tenure reform and land rents) would not be fully implemented. The bulk of the tenants, in particular, were either completely unaware of the law or they simply believed that the law would be modified, if not completely put aside (Saad 2002: 115). However, as soon as the deadline approached and it became clear that the implementation of the law would not be ruled out by the government, incidents and mass protest erupted in several governorates. As underlined by El Nour (2015: 206), in neoliberal Egypt “small farmers were first to revolt”, breaking the barrier of fear that the state had built, justifying the siege of a police state in the face of the Islamist threat, which peaked in the mid-1990s. According to the data provided by the Land Centre for Human Rights, there were incidents involving 32 fatalities, 751 injuries, and 2,410 arrests in the short period between January 1997 and May 1998, whilst between January 1988 and December 2000 there were at least 119 deaths linked to rural conflicts (Bush 2011: 394). Beni Suef rapidly emerged as one of the most conflictual spots. After landowners had announced that farmers’ tenancy contracts would not be renewed, over 3,000 farmers blocked all entrances to the city and sabotaged railway tracks (Abdelrahman 2015: 67). Similar protests also occurred in Kafr El Sheikh and Abu Nasser, as well as in the governorate of Dakahlia (Bush 2011: 401-402). Initially, farmers hoped to obtain the support of the government and sent thousands and thousands of emotionally written letters to President Mubarak. Tagammu, the Labour Party, and the Nasserist Party tried to capitalize on the wave of protests, negotiating with the government and organizing a farmers’ conference to

discuss the changes in tenancy. Nevertheless, the suspicion that the leaders of these three parties had a direct interest in evicting tenants from their lands, and the unwillingness of the regime to bargain a compromise meant that the aforementioned political forces, and Tagammu in particular, were not seen by farmers as reliable supporters in their struggle (Saad 2002: 118-119). After 1997, a leftist Peasant Solidarity Committee (PSC) was established by urban-based radical intellectuals (Bush 2011: 402). Nevertheless, protests in rural areas lacked any form of leadership or organization, and networks of resistance, given their sporadic and unstructured form, were vulnerable to repression from the state apparatuses. Moreover, although the support provided by some Cairo-centred NGOs was extremely generous, its actual efficacy was highly questionable. Likewise, media coverage – in sharp contrast to what was happening in the same years to workers’ protests – remained feeble. These elements helped to explain the extraordinarily high level of repression and police brutality with which farmers’ protests were met. According to Bush’s (2011: 400) data, 192 people were killed, 1066 injured, and 1333 arrested in 2009 alone. In addition, these numbers nearly doubled the following year (Table 7). The relentless violence imposed by the regime prevented the formation of an organized movement, but it failed to appease protests, which, since their first eruption in 1997, have not ceased yet (Abdelrahman 2015: 67).

TABLE 7						
VIOLENCE IN EGYPT'S COUNTRYSIDE, 2009-2010						
Year	Sit-ins	Demonstrations	Strikes	Arrested	Injured	Killed
2009	80	66	4	1333	1066	192
2010	91	75	2	1687	1451	297
Source: Bush (2011: 400)						

Some villages became symbols of farmers’ bravery, as well as of police terror. Arguably, what happened in the Delta village of Sarando in 2005 was one of the most contested and violent cases of dispossession. The Nawra family, which benefitted from the implementation of Law 96, receiving back land it had lost in 1965, evicted hundreds of farmers and their families, colluding with security forces and pseudo-paramilitary squadrons (Bush 2011: 403). All the entrances to the village were closed off, residents imprisoned, and women harassed and humiliated. Due to police violence, there was also a case of miscarriage and the death of a young woman (Abdelrahman 2015: 68). Often, farmers’ mobilization was built on previous

experiences of resistance and struggles, showing that, similarly to the industrial sector, there was a long-lasting effect of previous militancy in rural Egypt too. In Bahout, for instance, where strong protests had erupted in the 1950s, peasants occupied 65 feddans and successfully confronted landlords who tried to evict them (Bush 2011: 403). It also seems significant that the range of contention grew markedly throughout the 2000s. Although the attempt to obtain a sympathetic reaction from officials, by sending telegrams to them and the media, was never completely abandoned, sit-ins, demonstrations, and street blockings became more commonplace. One of the events worth mentioning to demonstrate the level of rural violence was the uprising in the village of Nama. After a child was killed by a car passing on a motorway, people isolated the village, blocking the road with palm trees and damaging 13 cars (El Nour 2015: 202). Moreover, violent protests against the erection of mobile phone masts became rather common throughout the countryside, reflecting an increasing interest in environmental issues (Abdelrahman 2015: 67). This was something relatively new for a country scarcely inclined to be involved in these kinds of problems. In sharp contrast to small peasants' and tenants' protests, environmental issues brought about the formation of cross-class coalitions in which lower classes and local elites joined forces against the decisions taken by the central government. A case in point is the great mobilization in Damietta against the attempt led by a Canadian enterprise to set up a large fertilizer complex in Ras al-Barr, located at the end of Damietta's estuary (Elmusa and Sowers 2012: 250-260). Although it might be inappropriate to talk about a "Damietta exceptionalism", it is certainly true that this experience was not replicated elsewhere⁵³. The Damietta protests were successful in blocking the industrial project due to, first and foremost, the inclusive nature of the opposition coalition:

The coalition that emerged to oppose the EAgrium plant crossed class and occupational lines, and included representatives of voluntary associations, members of Parliament, businessmen, university professors, landowners, and members of unions and professional syndicates (*Ibid.*: 250).

Moreover, the political opposition was united too against the new fertilizer complex. Not only did the Muslim Brotherhood use Friday prayers to contest the project and the regime more widely, but also a strict collaboration among leftists, liberals, Nasserists, and Islamists emerged in the Popular Committee, which was established to coordinate protests and actions.

⁵³ Needless to say, Damietta, with its more than 220,000 inhabitants, cannot be considered a rural environment.

Partly, this collaboration was an effect of the mercantile and open-minded character of the Mediterranean city. However, it was far more a consequence of the new collaborative atmosphere among different political forces that took shape throughout the 2000s.

4.4 The pro-democracy movement

Many scholars were surprised, even amazed, to see the astonishing scenes of reciprocal respect and open collaboration during the 2011 uprising between the Islamists and the secular left. After all, political opposition to the ruling regime in Egypt had been sharply divided by ideological differences, mutual distrust, and even personal disputes in previous decades. Often, rivalries among opposition groups were so strong that they exceeded the conflict between them and the regime (Abdelrahman 2009: 37). In particular, from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, several incidents between the secular left and the Islamists – the most ‘classic’ among all political rivalries in the Arab world – were reported. President Sadat’s process of economic opening determined a sharp resurgence of class and social conflict. In the 1970s the growth of Islamist forces, therefore, was promoted by the regime to counterbalance the hegemonic positions that the various leftist tendencies had in intellectual circles and in university campuses at that time. Finding implicit support from state forces, Islamists violently assaulted leftist university students several times throughout the 1970s (El-Hamalawy 2007). Moreover, when, after the mass demonstrations in January 1977, the regime accused the left of having fuelled the protests, the Muslim Brotherhood agreed with the mainstream narrative of a ‘communist conspiracy’ (Abdelrahman 2009: 41). Similarly, threatened by the increasing influence of the Islamists, not only among the poorest layers of society but also among middle-class professional syndicates, the ‘legal left’ Tagammu and Stalinist forces alike chose an alliance with secular intelligentsia, feminist organizations, and the regime itself. The latter, in fact, was seen by them as ‘the lesser of two evils’.

This scenario started changing slowly from the mid-1990s onwards, when embryonic and scarcely visible forms of collaboration between different political traditions emerged. Three elements explained why this was the case. First of all, the already mentioned liberal leaning taken by Mubarak’s regime in the 1980s was rapidly reversed after the signature of the IMF-sponsored structural adjustment plan. The regime’s clampdown on civil freedoms and opposition forces accelerated sharply throughout the 1990s, exploiting the presence of radical Islamist movements to restrict political spaces *tout court*. Secondly, a ‘new left’, influenced

by Trotskyism, emerged. Small circles of students in the late 1980s became a structured organization, labelled the Revolutionary Socialists (RS), in 1995. In sharp contrast to the ‘old left’, these activists adopted a completely new behaviour towards other political tendencies and Political Islam in particular, often using the slogan ‘sometimes with the Islamists, never with the state’ (El-Hamalawy 2007). This important U-turn in several leftist groups was, at least partially, influenced by Chris Harman’s book *The Prophet and the Proletariat*, published in 1994. The main aim of this book was to draw a new theoretical and strategical approach to Islamists, assuming that the left had also been marginalized in Egypt due to its inability to deal effectively with the growing influence of Political Islam. In particular, the need for a third position between the two prevailing approaches was underlined. On the one hand, leading academic scholars such as Samir Amin and Gilbert Achcar have seen the Islamic movements as “the result of a bourgeois mobilization of segments of the petty bourgeoisie, in alliance with the state, with the aim of weakening the left”, identifying, therefore, Islamism as a fascist and reactionary force (Naguib 2009: 105). On the other hand, as clearly demonstrated by the Iranian case in the late 1970s, another strand within the left simply represented Political Islam as a progressive and anti-imperialist force (Abdelrahman 2015: 99). The solution, according to Harman, was neither to join the ranks of the regime for tactical reasons to prevent the MB from attaining power nor to uncritically support the Islamists. As explained by Sameh Naguib (2009: 108), a sociologist at the American University of Cairo and leading member of the RS, contradictions and opposing tendencies within Islamist movements had to be identified and exploited through some sort of collaboration with the Islamists. Thirdly and finally, Islamist groups, both reformists such as the MB and radicals such as the *Gama‘a Islamiyya*, modified profoundly some of their founding principles and tactics in the 1990s. In the early years of that decade, a low-grade civil war was fought between *Gama‘a Islamiyya*’s members and security forces, in which over 1,000 people lost their lives (Stein 2012: 179). The struggle conducted by the regime against radical Islamist movements did not spare the MB, which was severely weakened by the regime’s crackdown on its rank-and-file members and leadership (Abdelrahman 2015: 101). The repression forced the MB into two directions: a) working in the shadows; and b) trying to find a closer cooperation with other opposition forces. The latter aspect was also favoured by two other elements. First, the emergence of a middle generation of new cadres, who represented themselves as tolerant and democratic, politically grew up in the student mobilizations in the 1970s and in the professional syndicates in the 1980s (*Ibid.*: 102). Second, both as a direct attempt to get closer to liberal and leftist oppositions and as a consequence of repression, the MB downplayed their references to

sharia and embraced a more moderate discourse about liberal democracy, political freedom, and women's rights. This process accelerated after the terroristic attack against tourists in Luxor in 1997, when 62 people were killed by six attackers, probably instigated by *Gama'a Islamiyya*'s leaders. The popular and widespread condemnation of the assault and the regime's crackdown determined a huge backlash for *Gama'a Islamiyya*, which agreed a ceasefire with the Egyptian government just a few months later. In the following years, the main leaders of *Gama'a Islamiyya*, first and foremost Najih Ibrahim, published several books (no fewer than 20) in which they re-examined Islamic sources and renounced the *jihad* against the Egyptian regime and violence against civilians (Stein 2012: 178).

The aforementioned changes in the institutional setting, as well as in the Islamist and leftist camps, were crucial to the development of a strong pro-democracy movement in the last decade of Mubarak's rule. Yet, without the opportunity for a closer collaboration provided by external issues, it is strongly debatable whether the embryonic collaboration that took place between Nasserists and leftists inside Cairo and Ain Shams universities in the late 1990s would have evolved into something greater and broader (Abdelrahman 2009: 42). Therefore, the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000 was really a key turning point, leading to spontaneous demonstrations in universities and schools. The catalyst of the protest became the Egyptian Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada (EPCSPI), generally known as the Popular Committee (PC). This was established by leftist militants, predominantly members of NGOs, whereas the Islamists were initially quite tepid, going as far as condemning the clashes between security forces and protesters at pro-Palestinian sit-ins in October 2000 and denouncing these as 'socialist sabotages' (El-Hamalawy 2007). The first public demonstration organized by the PC took place on September 10, 2001, in Tahrir Square and was rapidly followed by several others. Moreover, fund-raising campaigns, seminars and cultural meetings, and the financing of medical and relief convoys were arranged (Abdelrahman 2015: 31). It has been calculated that the equivalent of \$400,000 in donations, food, and medical supplies was collected in two years of campaigning (El-Mahdi 2009: 94). To a large extent, it was the sudden and largely unpredicted return to street politics after more than two decades that generated pressure on the MB's leadership from its own organization's cadres to become part of the protest. Nasserists also followed suit, participating in the various activities of the PC (*Ibid.*: 42). The pro-Palestinian mobilization determined therefore the first serious reapproach among opposition forces that had been at odds for decades. In addition, it established some crucial elements that

would become typical in the following mobilizations: *a)* membership in the PC was open to individuals, rather than organizations, favouring therefore the formation of a cross-ideological coalition *de facto*; *b)* the model adopted was horizontal and decentralized, creating a network of groups based in different cities in spite of a hierarchical and centralized pyramid; and finally *c)* the movement attracted many youth activists, the bulk of whom had never participated before in politics (Shehata 2012: 109-110). As soon as the threat of a US-led invasion in Iraq became concrete, the Popular Committee rapidly evolved into an anti-war movement. In early 2003, several rallies were spontaneously held by students on university campuses as well as in front of mosques. On March 5, almost unnoticed, a small rally of about 150 activists, surrounded by twice as many riot police, contested the 1981 Emergency Law just half a block from the Parliament, crossing the red line for the regime of having ‘political’ protests with regard to internal affairs (Schemm 2012: 89-90). On March 20, a massive demonstration against the US intervention in Iraq took place in Cairo, with Tahrir being ‘invaded’ by no fewer than 40,000 protesters and occupied for hours. The takeover completely surprised security forces, which had been deployed in great numbers in the streets, but did not expect such an unprecedented show of opposition (Shehata 2012: 110). The police repressed the uprising violently, beating demonstrators with their batons and arresting between 800 and 1,500 activists (Schemm 2012: 86). Although the attempt to repeat the occupation of Tahrir in the following weeks failed, for the first time since January 1977 popular protests had been successful in seriously challenging the regime.

In the months that preceded and followed the anti-war mobilization, meetings, rallies, and cultural initiatives were held among several opposition forces and prominent anti-regime activists, leading to two important Cairo Conferences against Imperialism and Zionism (December 2002 and December 2003) and the formation of the Egyptian Anti-Globalization Group (AGEG). Several of these experiences were influenced by the World Social Forum (WSF) and adopted a verbal rhetoric and an actual organization that were similar to what the Global Justice Movement (GJM) had done. Importantly, the Cairo conferences served to connect activists with different backgrounds, overtaking the reciprocal mistrusts, and creating an atmosphere of collaboration in the ideological broad and politically fragmented opposition camp (Abdelrahman 2015: 33-36). The planted seeds in the early 2000s sprouted up as new and richer plants in December 2004, when the first silent demonstration was held by Kifaya (Enough). Three months earlier, seven veteran activists, including Marxists, Nasserists, Islamists, and Liberals, had discussed at a dinner the opportunity to mobilize against the

referendum that would mark Mubarak's fifth six-year term in office, agreeing on the slogan of the protest, 'Kifaya!' (El-Mahdi 2009: 89). At the same time, 300 intellectuals and activists came together and officially established Kifaya, which was mainly focused on preventing a new Mubarak mandate and avoiding the whispered dynastic succession from Hosni to Gamal. Kifaya was certainly the quintessence of the pro-democracy movement that blossomed in Egypt throughout the 2000s, representing its main strengths and weaknesses. The Egyptian Movement for Change, the formal name of Kifaya, was a horizontal, anti-hierarchical organization, with a steering committee composed of several tendencies: the Karama Party (a leftist faction that separated from the Nasserist Party in late 1996); the Ghad Party (Liberals); the Centre Party and the Labour Party (Islamists); and the Revolutionary Socialists (Marxists) (*Ibid.*: 91-92). It was focused on issues that were procedural and liberal in flavour, demanding, in addition to its (already seen) two major demands, the ending of the emergency law; free and fair parliamentary elections; a ceiling on the tenure of the President of no more than two terms; and complete freedom of expression and the press (Abdelrahman 2015: 37). Moreover, it was a middle-class, Cairo-based network, which not only completely failed to make contact with workers and farmers, who were protesting at that time, but also was largely ineffective in attracting significant segments of the educated middle classes, as shown by the fact that one year after its establishment Kifaya had accumulated just 1,800 signatures on its founding statement⁵⁴. Nevertheless, Kifaya's achievements were undisputable, contesting for the first time Mubarak's authority in public spaces, providing activists with a new, vibrant, and effective template for action, and fostering a vibrant environment for critical voices against the regime. The latter element, for instance, certainly played an important role in the judges' mobilization in the aftermath of the 2005 parliamentary elections. After some senior judges had condemned violence and intimidation during the first two rounds of elections, the response of the regime was simply to worsen the clampdown on opposition forces in the third and final round (*Ibid.*: 43). Two Vice-Presidents of the Court of Cassation became particularly vocal about frauds and the complete absence of freedom, making several statements both to the internal and international press. In February 2006, in revenge for this, the regime stripped their judicial immunity and charged the two judges with 'defaming the state', leading to a strong reaction from members of the semi-official organization the Judges' Club, who organized several sit-ins in Alexandria and Cairo. The reaction of the regime was brutal, leading to the arrest of over 250 activists, many of whom were Kifaya members (El-

⁵⁴ For a different interpretation of this number, inspired by partially sharable considerations about the difficulty in expressing dissent publicly in Egypt, see El-Mahdi (2009: 89).

Mahdi 2009: 99). However, the most important legacy of Kifaya, which never completely disappeared, but certainly lost momentum after 2006, was its inspiring effect leading to the establishment of a myriad of similar experiences in the following years. Among these, the most interesting ones were: Youth for Change, essentially a subgroup of Kifaya itself; the National Alliance for Change, established in June 2005 by a group of MB activists, the RS, the Karama Party, and the Ghad Party; and the groups We Can See You and The Street Is Ours, developed in the aftermath of repression against Kifaya's actions (El-Hamalawy 2007; Shehata 2012: 110-112; Abdelrahman 2015: 38). As can be seen in Table 8, the pro-democracy movement experience was extraordinarily rich and complex in Egypt in the 2000s, emerging as unmatched by any other Arab country in the same period.

TABLE 8				
THE PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT, 2000-2010				
Period	Mobilizing Networks	Issues	Actions	Main political forces involved
2000-2002	EPCSPI	Second Palestinian Intifada	Street protests; cultural meetings; fund-raising campaigns; and medical and relief convoys	NGOs; leftist militants; and later on Nasserists and Islamists
2003-2004	Anti-war movement; Cairo Coneference; AGE	Iraqi War; anti-imperialism; anti-Zionism	Mass-based protests; conferences and cultural events	Marxists; Nasserists; Liberals; and Islamists
2004-2006	Kifaya and its 'sisters'; the Judges' Club	Preventing a new Mubarak mandate; and avoiding dynastic succession	Public contestation of Mubarak's power; sit-ins; critical newspaper articles; institutional struggle	Karama Party; Ghad Party; Centre Party; Labour Party; RS; MB members
2007-2010	Tadamon; the April 6 Movement	Supporting workers' struggles; and procedural and liberal issues	Media coverage; legal assistance; and mobilization	Ghad Party; Labour Party; Revolutionary Socialists
Source: My own elaboration				

As already stated, Kifaya did not escape the usual weaknesses of opposition groups in Egypt: internal splits; the generation gap; and personal disputes. On a much more political level, as soon as repression became stronger and Mubarak's regime was successful in winning the

parliamentary and presidential elections, some activists started feeling that ‘Kifaya was not enough’. In particular, some members of Youth for Change recognized that a real threat to the regime could only be brought about by the establishment of closer links between ‘political’ mobilizations and ‘economic’ strikes, which had accelerated markedly after the appointment of Nazif’s government in 2004 and had become spectacularly visible to Cairo-based intelligentsia after the December 2006 great strike in Mahalla al-Kubra (De Smet 2012: 148). In 2007, Tadamon (Solidarity) was established by an array of activists, including Marxists from the RS, Liberals from the Ghad Party, and Islamists from the Labour Party. As specified in the founding declaration of the movement, Tadamon was first and foremost engaged in supporting the labour movement, learning from and transferring experiences to it. In 2007 and 2008, Tadamon was active in supporting workers’ struggles, publicizing their strikes and protests, as well as providing legal assistance (Shehata 2012: 114). After a textile national strike had been called by workers in Mahalla al-Kubra and scheduled for April 6, 2008, Tadamon enthusiastically called for a general strike in solidarity. As we know, the strike was a failure, but in its aftermath the April 6 Movement was established, attracting slightly fewer than 2,000 members across 12 governorates on the eve of the uprising (*Ibid.*: 115). The organizational structure chosen by the movement was quite similar to that of Kifaya, but its liberal concerns were much more mixed with social issues, as clearly shown by the campaign for raising the minimum wage to LE1,200. It can be concluded that the April 6 Movement was, at the same time, the product of the reciprocal fertilization between ‘economic’ and ‘political’ demands, as well as one of the main triggers of the uprising in which the two horns of the protest movement eventually fused together in an unprecedented mass revolt.

5. The making of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition

When the Egyptian army decided that Mubarak had to leave the presidency, this surprising verdict did not indicate that the military agreed with protesters’ demands, let alone that it was in favour of democratization. During the now famous 18 days of relentless protests, the armed forces constantly adapted themselves to a magmatic and socially explosive situation, which determined the sudden and extraordinary increase in the role of state institutions. It was the collapse of the two pillars on which Mubarak’s regime was built (the political centre represented by the ruling party, the NDP, and the coercive apparatus structured around the Ministry of the Interior) that ‘forced’ the army to the forefront of the Egyptian political

landscape. Initially, the army's move was simply defensive – that is, it was aimed at preventing the complete collapse of the state during a crisis that risked tearing the country apart (Albrecht and Bishara 2011: 15). Subsequently, it evolved into a wait-and-see position, which became a 'no anti-protest stance' when, on January 31, the military stated that it would not repress demonstrations as long as these remained peaceful. As became clear in the following days, this was not a provision of military protection over protesters. On the contrary, it simply meant that the military had already ruled out the option of repressing the crowd gathered in Tahrir, as well as in many other squares across the country (Brownlee 2012: 145). Two conflicting explanations have been provided to account for this surprising decision. Some scholars have suggested that "the military saw the revolt as an opportunity to outflank its partners and get back on top" (Kandil 2014: 229). Others, adopting a less deterministic perspective and avoiding an interpretation based on the view that the armed forces are a monolithic bloc, have evaluated the astonishing costs and risks – for the military itself – of conducting widespread repression (Nassif 2012: 20; Ketchley 2014: 173-176; Roll 2016: 26). Whilst top-ranking officials wanted to protect Mubarak, they needed mid-ranking and junior officials, as well as rank-and-file soldiers, to keep him in power. Yet, precisely because the patronage system developed by Mubarak was aimed at the upper echelons of the armed forces, those who had to execute orders had no incentive to protect his regime. With the police physically defeated by protesters in the first four days of the uprising, the military unwilling to repress, and the assault led by plainclothes police and *baltagiya* on protesters in Tahrir having miserably failed, Mubarak's regime could only rely on political negotiation with moderate forces, hoping in this way to break the opposition front. The failure of the repeated attempts to appease protesters through political concessions, as well as the outbreak of an unprecedented wave of workers' strikes as soon as public enterprises were reopened on February 6, 'forced' the armed forces "to place themselves at the head of the revolution and 'lead' it, in order to defeat it" (De Smet 2016: 205). On February 11, Mubarak's regime was over.

There is a lot of evidence suggesting that had the generals asked soldiers to shoot protesters, a mutiny in the military's ranks would have been the most likely scenario. As seen before, this was partially an effect of the meagre economic and social position in which mid-ranking officials and ordinary soldiers in Mubarak's Egypt lived. Even more importantly, when the armed forces were called in on January 28 they faced a mass-based revolt in which almost all Egyptian social classes, political tendencies, and religious beliefs throughout the country were

involved. Repressing such an uprising, in which protesters had no clear ideological leaning, claimed to be *the people*, and immediately fraternized with the military would have meant tarnishing a long-lasting and indisputably positive reputation – at least for the bulk of Egyptians. That was a price not worth paying for a clique of neoliberal cronies. Not only did the implicit formation of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition propel a spectacular social and political crisis, but it also eventually determined the downfall of Mubarak's regime. Had the uprising been much more limited in class, religious, ideological, or geographical terms, it is likely that the police would have been successful in repressing it, halting immediately the development of the events. Moreover, even if the police had been defeated, the military would have been less inclined to show restraint, considering the biased composition of the protesters. After all, as shown by the 1977 bread riots, when the military was deployed onto the streets to repress the ongoing uprising, and by the 2013 military coup against the first democratically elected President in Egypt, explanations based on the supposedly high professionalism of the Egyptian armed forces are weak, if not completely inaccurate (Lutterbeck 2011: 24-30; Bellin 2012: 134). It was the unprecedented level of social mobilization and the emergence of a broad alliance between different political traditions that ruled out the possibility of a military intervention. The crucial aspect here is not whether Tantawi supported or not Mubarak's government, but whether the military had the capacity to keep the Pharaoh in power. Due to the situation on the ground, it seems that the latter was simply not feasible.

As stated at length, the implicit formation of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition was not a sudden and unforeseen coming together of a medley of middle-class professionals, industrial workers, students, street vendors, small peasants, football fans, clerical workers, and the unemployed. Similarly, the sharp divisions among Egyptian opposition forces, and in particular between the secularist left and Political Islam, were overcome overnight on the eve of the uprising. On the contrary, these developments were the product of a molecular and long-lasting process, which went on for several years, if not decades, and eventually became spectacularly visible 'in the 18 days that shook the Arab world'. As eloquently pointed out by Maha Abdelrahman (2015: 29), arguing against the instant analysis that has characterized several studies on the Egyptian uprising, "it did not start in Tahrir". In the 2000s, the intensification of protests mobilized large echelons of Egyptians, crossing rural-urban divides, creating cross-ideological cooperation, and attracting different socio-economic groups (Table 9). To a large extent, it might be concluded that the whole country was in a constant state of

ferment in the last decade of Mubarak's rule and virtually no segment of society escaped the contagious effect of the spread of a 'culture of protest' (El-Mahdi 2009: 87-103). Having said that, this does not mean that each social class contributed in equal measure to the success of the uprising.

TABLE 9			
THE MOBILIZING CAPACITY OF THE CITY, THE FACTORY, AND THE COUNTRYSIDE			
	Social class	Abdelrahman's typology	Mobilizing structure
the city	Middle class	pro-democracy movement	EPCSPI; Anti-war mov.; Cairo Conf.; AGEK; Kifaya; Tadamon; the April 6 Mov.
	Clerical workers	labour movement	strike committees; independent unions
	Lumpenproletariat	market-relations-based-protest	None
the factory	Industrial workers	labour movement	strike committees
the countryside	Small farmers; lumpenproletariat	market-relations-based-protest	loosely organized networks; the PSC
Source: My own elaboration			

Although the role played, for instance, by small peasants and nearly landless farmers should not be completely overlooked, it has to be underlined that in the 'long way to Tahrir' the pro-democracy movement and workers' struggles were the two most crucial elements. Since the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000, educated middle classes, mainly based in Cairo, started protesting against Zionism and imperialism, before turning their attention to procedural and liberal issues concerning the Egyptian institutional framework. The pro-democracy movement peaked in the 2004–2006 period, when Kifaya was formed and developed into 'a network of networks'. Putting together a broad spectrum of political tendencies – from Marxism to Political Islam, from Nasserism to Liberalism – the pro-democracy movement was the cradle of a cross-ideological cooperation with no precedent in recent Egyptian history. However, despite the ideological heterogeneity of this movement, it remained strictly urban, liberal in flavour, and middle class in composition, failing to attract –

with just a few exceptions in the early 2000s – disfranchised masses. As soon as the ‘political’ soul of the protest movement against Mubarak’s new order declined, the ‘economic’ side took the upper hand. Workers’ strikes were already on the rise between 1998 and 2003, accelerating markedly after the appointment of Nazif’s businessmen government in 2004. Then, the great strike in Mahalla al-Kubra in December 2006 played a “transformative role” in workers’ struggles (Beinin 2012: 92; Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 101). This was mainly a response from below to neoliberal policies promoted by the government that penalized workers markedly – in social and economic terms. Due to the fact that the ETUF was completely co-opted and subjugated to the government’s will (not only at the top level, but also in its lowest cells), workers were forced to mobilize through ad hoc created structures – first and foremost, strike committees. While this aspect granted to the labour movement an extraordinary effervescence, it also determined that workers’ actions were uncoordinated and without any possibility of staging a national protest, as demonstrated by the failed strike in the textile sector on April 6, 2008.

Despite their weaknesses, workers’ protests were crucial in creating a profitable interplay with the mobilizations staged by the pro-democracy movement. Whilst the ‘political’ and ‘economic’ struggles have often been portrayed as two separated and nearly antithetical fields, the decade-long cycle of protests in Egypt shows us that actually ‘political’ demands and ‘economic’ strikes strengthened one another, producing a reciprocal fertilization and bursting eventually into a massive uprising. It is interesting to note that as early as 2007, when the pro-democracy movement was at a standstill, middle-class activists started seeing in the collaboration with workers the only feasible way out. On the eve of the uprising, therefore, not only had a reciprocal trust among the broad and mixed opposition camp been forged, but the awareness that workers were key to defeating Mubarak’s regime had taken root in several intellectual circles in Cairo. The latter aspect was evident in the demands that were put forth by the heterogeneous group of forces that called for protests on January 25. Together with constitutional and procedural issues, in fact, there were also two aspects – increasing the minimum wage and obtaining assistance for the unemployed – that tried to cover the social soul of the opposition to Mubarak’s regime. Evidently, this was not enough to ‘conquer’ a labour movement that lacked an organized and centralized structure. The Egyptian uprising, therefore, was largely a middle-class protest in its early phases. Without neglecting the role played by working-class neighbourhoods in Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez, as well as by the urban poor in the cruel and bloody clashes with the security forces, the leading role in the

revolt was taken by an urban, educated, and liberal-oriented middle class. Partially, this was the product of the mobilization of those professional categories – first and foremost, lawyers – that were middle class ‘by nature’. Much more, however, this was the effect of the organizational network(s) that provided the crucial framework for the entry of the masses into the political arena. It has often been underlined that the Egyptian uprising was leaderless, a-ideological, and lacking the support of any significant political group. Although there is some truth in this, it cannot be overlooked that on January 25 protests were not spontaneous, but rather organized and called by several political groups. They were animated by different ideological views, but their internal composition was always – arguably with the partial exception of the Muslim Brotherhood – middle class. In other words, whereas in Tunisia the most important organizational support was provided by the UGTT, through its militant and radical cells and federations, in Egypt middle-class networks were the centrepiece of the protests.

At the same time, it should not be forgotten that the implicit formation of an alliance between educated middle classes and disgruntled urban poor that erupted in several cities of the country was not enough to force Mubarak out. Had the uprising remained limited to these social classes and restricted to the main Egyptian squares, it is likely that it would have been defeated.

On the contrary, it was the geographical and social diffusion of the uprising after February 6 that altered the balance of resources between the rulers and ruled. Partially, this was the product of the fact that farmers and countryside ‘lumpenproletariat’ joined the fray, implicitly spreading the uprising far beyond its urban cradle (El Nour 2015: 203). However, the key factor for the success of the protests was the impressive entry of workers as a collective actor in the storm of the uprising. Once again, the wave of strikes that completely paralyzed the whole Egyptian economy, and also affected the military’s empire, was the product of factory-based mobilizations with feeble, if any, national links. Dealing with the growing social soul of an uprising that could not be repressed, and fearing that a political revolt might evolve into a social revolution, the last institution of the ruling elite to remain intact – that is, the military – removed Mubarak and his regime to preserve itself and the system as a whole (De Smet 2016: 205). After just 18 days of relentless protests a supposedly unbeatable authoritarian regime was therefore defeated.

Chapter 5
ALGERIA:
THE AUTHORITARIAN STUBBORNNESS

1. An uprising that was not such

1.1 Protests and riots

The last important event in Algerian social and political life in 2010 was the protest in the Algiers neighbourhood of Les Palmiers. The trigger was the endemic lack of housing and the classic attempt led by the government to relocate residents living in old and decrepit houses to new ones, generally situated in faraway districts. Not surprisingly, therefore, these relocations were constantly opposed by those who were supposed to benefit from them. After a week of underground discontent, clashes between dwellers and security forces broke out on December 29 when 53 people were injured and 29 others arrested. This episode is arguably a clear snapshot of a year that could have been labelled as that of “one thousand and one riots” (Bennadji 2011: 263). This astonishing and symbolic number, maybe paradoxically, is simply an evocative estimate of a much larger phenomenon that has been evaluated by other analysts at close to 10,000 events of discontent in 2010 alone (Chibani 2011). Certainly, riots are anything but a new form of protest in Algeria. Since 2005 scarcely a fortnight has gone by without a riot somewhere in the country (Roberts 2011). At the same time, the magnitude of what happened in 2010 was without precedent for the North African country. The constant state of revolt of the Algerian society was not, as long as all these episodes remained isolated one from the other, seriously challenging for the regime. However, the situation suddenly changed when two new ingredients were added: the Tunisian revolt and its inspiring effect on the whole of the Middle East; and the sudden increase in the price of many basic food items and the easily understandable consequences for the lower classes.

Algeria has been affected by serious social, economic, and political problems in its recent past. Without being an exception in the region, the country suffered from a lack of transparency and widespread corruption, youth unemployment and a housing shortage, the elite’s despotic use of power, and the long-lasting state of emergency that severely restricted political freedoms. All these factors formed the background to the enduring discontent that characterized the country in the 2000s. Then, the situation evolved into a more conflictual scenario when two other contingent elements emerged simultaneously. The first one was the increasing strength of the Tunisian uprising, which by the last days of 2010 was no longer confined to interior regions and started inspiring other people in neighbouring countries to take to the street and voice their grievances. The actual influence of the Tunisian events on the

Algerian uprising is hard to assess. Certainly, as long as Ben Ali was in power – that is, until January 14 – this effect should not be overestimated. This is not to say that what was happening in Tunisia did not encourage Algerians in any way. Actually, it did. However, it seems fair enough to state that the long week of violent and widespread protests in Algeria that started on January 3 was much more the involuntary result of a government's scarcely pondered decision rather than a snowball effect. Aiming at curbing the increasingly flourishing informal sector of the economy, which accounted for about 40 per cent of the total, the government imposed the substitution of cash with traceable checks (Chibani 2011; Darbouche 2011). This policy did not take into consideration the plausible reaction of private sector traders, who, to protect their profits, raised the prices of products sharply, causing a sudden 30 to 45 per cent increase in the cost of staple foodstuffs. In a few days starting from January 1, the price of cooking oil, flour, and sugar skyrocketed, hitting poor Algerian families hard. The first protests were reported in a few quarters of Oran, Algeria's second-largest city, and near Algiers as early as January 3 (Parks 2012: 108). Then, two days later these gained momentum, affecting several districts in the capital and Oran, as well as other towns, including Annaba and Djelfa. In Algiers, riots were concentrated in Bab el Oued and nearby suburbs. This alarmed the regime. Bab el Oued was, in fact, the epicentre of the October 1988 events when the security apparatus massacred hundreds of demonstrators who were protesting unarmed in numerous cities (Brown 2011a). Moreover, as in that situation the Islamists were able to take the upper hand in a movement that they had not started, former number two of the FIS (*Front Islamique du Salut*), Ali Belhadj, went to Bab el Oued to witness the events and encourage the youth to revolt against the regime on January 6. In a tragedy that was now farcically repeated, Ali Belhadj was arrested once again (Rabia 2011). Yet, this was not enough to halt a movement that by January 7 had spread to cities in nearly half of Algeria's 48 prefectures, covering almost the whole of the north as well as some towns in the often quiet Sahara (Parks 2012: 109). The main targets of the rioters were government buildings, especially town halls, whilst in some areas shops were also looted or burned (Brown 2011a). The regime reacted quickly to a situation that was becoming increasingly challenging as the hours went by. To begin with, the security forces were deployed en masse onto the streets, targeting mosques in the working-class suburbs on the day of prayer – Friday 7 – as well as central and vital parts of the capital around the Parliament, the Senate, and other institutional buildings (Volpi 2013: 107). But following Interior Minister Dahou Ould Kablia's direct command, police forces were ordered to show restraint, avoiding clashing with protesters as much as possible and simply abandoning the suburbs to the rioters (Khadige

2011). According to some, this tactic was brilliant because it did not provide protesters with the necessary ingredient for a successful uprising – that is, martyrs (Brown 2011b: 13). Secondly, football matches on Friday 7 and Saturday 8 were cancelled. This was not only an attempt to avoid large concentrations of people, but also a reasoned decision not to provide during a particularly conflictual social phase a public space that since the 1980s has become an arena for political mobilization (Amara 2012: 42). Finally, and most importantly, on January 8 the government announced a reversal of the price increases and new policies to support the purchasing power of the lower classes were put in place (Brown 2011b: 15). The rioting continued for another couple of days, but by January 11 calm had been restored across the whole country. After one week of deep-rooted and strong confrontation between protesters – mainly young men – and security forces five people had lost their lives (three rioters, a 36-year-old man trying to protect his father's alcohol store, and a 65-year-old taxi driver after inhaling tear gas), hundreds had been wounded (including many police officers) and around 1,100 had been arrested (Khadige 2011). The protest movement – which started as a direct response to the state's failure to provide basic goods and services, but was without doubt a consequence of the never solved marginalization of large sectors of the Algerian society – was therefore incapable of surviving when the immediate trigger of its development was removed. The main reason was the non-formation of a broad coalition in social and political terms that went beyond those marginalized Algerians, either employed in the ever-growing informal sector or not employed at all. The failure to attract other sectors – from workers to urban middle classes – as well as the separation from any kind of political or social organization determined the inability of the movement to formulate articulate political demands and after a week of random violence, facing increasing critics from a tired population, the activism of its members vanished (Brown 2011a; Roberts 2011). Significantly, neither Mohamed Aouichia's self-immolation on January 12 nor Mohsen Bouterfif's tragic decision to set himself on fire the following day nor the dozens more attempted or successful self-immolations across the country later in the year were able to provoke something similar to what had happened in Tunisia or at least to reignite Algeria⁵⁵.

⁵⁵ According to Boubekour (2014), more than 150 Algerians have set themselves on fire since 2011, usually in front of government and public buildings. No further confirmation of this astonishing figure has been found.

1.2 The non-emergence of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition

As previously mentioned, protests and riots spread throughout Algeria, affecting large parts of the country in early January. Therefore, the anti-regime movement assumed immediately a national character, avoiding remaining concentrated in a specific geographical context. As highlighted in the second chapter of this thesis, this is a necessary condition for the success of an uprising. As a matter of fact, when a protest movement does not spread beyond its ‘cradle’, it is easily co-opted or repressed by the regime. At the same time, having a national character is never enough for a would-be uprising to bring down an authoritarian regime. It is also crucial that the protest movement is the product of an implicit cross-class and cross-ideological coalition. However, the riots and marches in Algeria largely remained limited to the urban poor, failing to attract other social classes. Arguably, the main missing actor was the industrial working class. This can be explained by two largely interrelated factors. First, the numerical and strategic marginalization of productive workers in manufacturing. This was mainly a direct consequence of the process of deindustrialization that hit the country from the late 1980s, when the decline of publicly owned heavy industry was not compensated for by the growth of the private sector (Bouzidi 2008: 18-24; Benabdallah 2009: 90-96; Bouyacoub 2012: 85-87; Hamouchene and Roubah 2016: 676-677). These profound transformations reduced significantly the potential disruptive power enjoyed by industrial workers, who because of their labour were increasingly less crucial for the economy. Second, the presence of an aristocracy of labour – that is, a partially favoured stratum of workers – in the hydrocarbon sector, where a tiny minority of the Algerian labour force produced an astonishing amount of wealth. This is a comparatively privileged stratum of workers vis-à-vis the class as a whole that – thanks to its higher salaries as well as social and material benefits – is likely to embrace corporatist and sectorial stances, showing lack of solidarity with unorganized workers or the unemployed (Bellin 2000: 183). This is not to say that privileged echelons of workers always embrace reactionary political positions. There can be exceptions – as powerfully shown by the crucial role played by oil workers in the Iranian revolution (Skocpol 1982: 265-283; Jafari 2013: 195-217). However, given the presence of several elements, Algeria was not a ‘deviant case’. To begin with, the geographic location of the oil and gas fields in scarcely populated desert regions, with the consequent physical isolation of these workers from the rest of the class, has to be underlined. In addition, there was also a significant, although difficult to assess with precision, presence of temporary foreign workers who, in pursuing their own interests, weakened solidarity links among hydrocarbon workers.

That said, the limited strength of the labour movement itself played an even greater role. This may seem to be circular reasoning: a labour movement did not develop because of the existence of a favoured stratum of workers, and this aristocracy was sectorial and parochial in its requests because of the absence of vast and radical workers' protests. This seemingly theoretical standstill is overcome by assuming a dynamic perspective and stressing the complex character of the aristocracy of labour. It is certainly a great hindrance to the development of a long and strong wave of worker mobilizations; however, when a regime – for several reasons – is challenged by protests and a crisis situation develops, new political opportunities for those favoured echelons of the working class emerge. In this type of situation, they might switch from reactionary to revolutionary behaviour. In short, it was precisely the comparatively privileged position enjoyed by these workers and the consequent fact that they had much more to lose that pushed them into wait-and-see positions. This stance, given the insignificant mobilization of workers in the other declining productive sectors, was never abandoned by Algerian oil and gas workers. Thus, the two aforementioned conditions strengthen one another to the point of determining the almost complete lack of a labour movement.

Not much more successful was the attempt to form a cross-ideological coalition through which all opposition forces put their divisions and different views aside and decided to mobilize jointly against their common enemy – that is, the regime – although they could agree on little more. The tactical cooperation among political forces that are traditionally rivals was prevented, first and foremost, by the specific institutional environment that had characterized Algeria since the outbreak of the civil war. In fact, this crucial event for the country triggered both direct and indirect consequences that played an important role in the failure of the 2011 protest movement. Starting with the former, the prolonged and violent confrontation between the security forces and Islamists that followed rapidly the military coup in January 1992 produced a zero-sum game in which all political parties and organizations were forced to support one side or the other (Mortimer 1996: 29; Roberts 2003: 164-167). In turn, this led to an extremely fragmented environment in which opposition forces distrusted one another as much as they distrusted the regime (Volpi 2013: 106). In addition, there were also indirect effects. The regime was dealing in the mid-1990s with several problems, including the Islamists' armed revolt, a serious economic crisis, and a fading legitimacy. To tackle the latter, a return to the electoral process was chosen by the government (Parks 2012: 106). This was certainly not an attempt to foster a process of democratization from above. On the

contrary, the main aim was to mask the actual authoritarian features of the regime with a democratic facade. In this way, Algeria became part of that increasingly large group of hybrid regimes that combine democratic institutions – such as, for instance, recurrent although neither free nor fair elections – and vast and untouched domains of bureaucratic and above all military power (Diamond 2002: 21-35). Although it might seem paradoxical, the less authoritarian character of the Algerian regime was a serious challenge for those attempting to establish a ‘negative coalition’ among all the opposition forces. There are two aspects that have to be taken into account here. First of all, the occurrence of elections that granted some spoils to those who agreed to contest mildly the regime without questioning its legitimacy leads to a “divided political environment” in which opposition is split into loyalists and radicals (Lust-Okar 2004: 159-179). The two camps pursue different interests and this creates a serious barrier to the development of a cross-ideological coalition. Second, the opportunity to participate in rigged elections where the victory of the regime is guaranteed through several tools and mechanisms is a tricky game for opposition. On the one hand, there is the concrete opportunity to obtain media visibility, political representation, and partial access to state resources. On the other, there is the serious risk of being seen as simply support for the regime, thereby fostering suspicion and distrust among the political parties as a whole and the rest of society, which tends to represent the former as a unique block of corrupted politicians. The combination of all these aspects explains why the establishment of a cross-ideological coalition through the action performed by newly formed organizations was not successful in Algeria. In particular, while in Tunisia and Egypt this process developed throughout the 2000s, when a vibrant and militant pro-democracy movement blossomed in Cairo and Tunis, in Algiers it was simply the despairing attempt to react to a situation that had suddenly become profitable. However, this was too little too late.

On January 20, an array of political parties, civil society associations, and independent trade unions met to discuss their responses to the magmatic situation. The following day, the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (CNCD, in French) was officially formed by about 20 signatories (Volpi 2013: 108). It comprised a few left-wing or secularist political parties, such as the RCD (*Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie*) and the Communist MDSO (*Mouvement Démocratique et Social*), several civil associations, such as the Algerian League for Human Rights (LADDH, the French acronym) and the RAJ (*Rassemblement Action Jeunesse*), and independent unions, such as the SNAPAP (*Syndicat National Autonome des Personnels de l’Administration Publique*) and the SATEF (*Syndicat*

Autonome de Travailleurs de l'Éducation et de la Formation) (Butcher 2014: 734-735). The newborn organization stated that it was searching for systemic changes and called for nationwide manifestations starting on February 9 (*Liberté*, January 21, 2011). Despite these high-sounding words, the political reality was much more complicated for the CNCD, which was affected by at least three serious shortcomings. First of all, although present at the first meeting, the FFS (*Front des Forces Socialistes*) did not join the new organization. The actual reasons for this decision remained unclear, but the absence of Hocine Aït Ahmed's party was certainly a serious blow for the protest movement. Indeed, not only was the FFS the oldest opposition party in the country, founded by Aït Ahmed himself in the wake of the victorious liberation war against France, but it also opposed continuously the regime and struggled to establish a Western-inspired liberal democracy in Algeria. Moreover, this defection was aggravated by the same and simultaneous decision taken by the PT (*Parti des Travailleurs*), by far the most important force in the leftist field. In short, two of the most prominent opposition parties did not take part in the formation and development of the new organization. Secondly, Political Islam was absent too. The reciprocal distrust between secularist and leftist forces, on the one hand, and the Islamists, on the other, was the direct and indirect legacy – as already seen – of the cruel civil war fought in the 1990s and its long-lasting legacies. In January 2011 these remained a serious hindrance to the formation of a 'negative coalition', preventing any sort of collaboration between different political traditions. In other words, due to several factors, the establishment of a cross-ideological coalition never took root in Algeria. What is stated here is confirmed by the already mentioned decision taken by the CNCD to call for manifestations on February 9. The fact that the newborn organization tried to organize protests on Wednesday rather than on Friday not only testified to the existence of this deep division between the two wings of the opposition, but also the secularists' fear that Islamists might have taken the lead in the protests, as had happened in the October 1988 events. Finally, in a surprise move, the RCD – that is, the most prominent party of the CNCD – announced its own march for democracy the day after the formation of the organization itself, on January 22. This was a sharp confirmation of the profound rivalries and divisions within the newly established coordination, which each social and political force tried to exploit to its own advantage. Under the state of emergency, the government did not authorize the manifestation and more than 20,000 police officers were deployed onto the streets, closing May First Square in central Algiers off and preventing would-be protesters from Tizi Ouzou and Béjaïa – the two largest cities of the Kabylia region, the traditional stronghold of the RCD – from reaching the capital (*Liberté*, January 22, 2011). A few hundred demonstrators – some

waving Tunisian banners – gathered for hours in front of police officers⁵⁶. The final reports stated that nearly 100 protesters were wounded and dozens arrested (*Liberté*, January 23, 2011). Other manifestations and protests followed suit in the following days, but once again there were either few participants or they were severely repressed. Moreover, none of these protests were called by the CNCD. The coordination among official opposition forces remained therefore extremely weak even during this cathartic period. Only the astonishing news coming from Cairo was able to revitalize the Algerian political landscape. However, what should have been for many the first serious attack on the heart of the regime quickly became the end point of an aborted uprising.

1.3 The last blaze

On February 11, after 18 days of relentless protests, Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign. The news shocked the world and ignited even more a region that was witnessing a generalized revolt against old and new autocrats. The CNCD tried to capitalize on the situation and called for manifestations the following day in the main Algerian cities. On February 12, all the accesses to Algiers were blocked and 26,000–28,000 police officers were ready to prevent any attempt to march towards crucial government buildings. Nevertheless, between 3,000 and 5,000 demonstrators took to the street that day to voice their grievances and were also able to occupy May First Square for a while, before being outnumbered by nearly ten to one by the security forces (Parks 2012: 110). Other protests and clashes were reported in Oran, Annaba, and Constantine. However, by the evening the regime had already been able to retake full control of the situation and had completely cleaned up May First Square. Certainly, the physical inability to occupy a key public space – as for instance had happened in Cairo with Tahrir Square – in which opposition energies might be channelled and multiplied was particularly damaging for the challengers. Yet, this should be regarded more as the product of the protest movement's weakness, which continued to be split into many rival groups, rather than a success of the regime's tactic. It was the non-formation of a broad opposition coalition that made it quite easy for the government to contain the protest movement. Two episodes are paradigmatic in this regard. First of all, when Ali Belhadj, recently released after the January

⁵⁶ Arguably, this was the first time that Tunisian symbols had been waved in Algeria. This should raise scholars' confidence that the events in early January were much more closely related to the sudden increase in the price of many basic foodstuffs rather than to an inspiring effect coming from Tunisia.

events, and other Islamist supporters tried to join other demonstrators who were marching towards May First Square they were pushed back. However, this was not the work of the police, but the decision taken by other protesters who feared Islamist infiltrations (Volpi 2013: 109). Secondly, on February 13 the CNCD stated that further protests would have taken place every Saturday, thereby ignoring the Islamists' request to continue mobilization on Friday (*Liberté*, February 14, 2011). New disappointing and even smaller turnouts followed. The last blow to the protest movement was the government's decision to end the state of emergency on February 22 after this had been in place for 19 years (Achy 2013: 14). By the end of February it had already become clear that the wave of protests that was engulfing the whole region would not have affected Algeria in the same way. In short, the North African country had already missed the Arab uprising bandwagon. After all, a geographically diffused, but limited in social and political terms, uprising cannot defeat an authoritarian regime. The absence of a long wave of strikes and protests in the workplaces and the weakness of the pro-democracy movement limited protests to the urban poor, who, without the crucial help of workers' organizations as well as that of middle-class professional groups and political forces, were rapidly defeated by the regime. In short, it was the non-establishment of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition that condemned a would-be uprising to its failure.

2. Weathering a storm that was fatal to others⁵⁷

In Lahcen Achy's (2013: 13) suggestive words, "Algeria has all of the factors that have combined to fuel dramatic revolts in neighbouring countries [...] and yet, no sustained Algerian uprising took place". Among these factors there were all those elements – frankly, no less present in Algeria than in the other Arab countries – that have often been regarded as decisive in understanding the roots of the protests: from a high unemployment rate to endemic corruption, from limited economic opportunities for well-trained youth to the elite's despotic use of power. Additionally, as powerfully stated by a number of comparative studies, republican regimes were in general much less stable than monarchies (Yom and Gause 2012;

⁵⁷ The defeat of the protest movement in Algeria has led to the development of several explanations that have been asystematic and specifically related to the country, making it difficult to deal with these accounts in the first part of the thesis. In this section, therefore, there is an attempt to take into consideration the main explanations provided by scholars to give an account of Algeria's stability, showing that all of them are unsatisfactory, at least in the orthodox form in which they have been presented.

Brownlee et al. 2013; 2015). Evidently, when some of the aforementioned sociological variables have been used to explain the causes of the mobilization from *below*, and the institutional dichotomy between republican and monarchical regimes has been assumed to be one of the decisive factors in understanding the capacity of a response from *above*, the stability of the authoritarian regime in Algeria has emerged as a surprising outcome. In their attempt to solve this puzzle, scholars have had two main responses: *a*) the still-too-recent trauma of the bloody and cruel civil war acted as a powerful brake on the mobilizing capacities of Algerian society; and *b*) the effective and brilliant use of the security forces – something considered the result of the so-called authoritarian learning process – avoided the radicalization of the protests.

A general wisdom has pervaded academic and journalist accounts alike regarding the relative – at least from a comparative perspective – docility of Algerian society in 2011: that the country had already experienced its “Arab Spring” some 20 years before, and that it feared a repetition of the tragic events that led Algeria into an almost never-ending civil war (Brown 2011b: 13; Zeraoui 2012: 136; Achy 2013: 12; Khan and Mezran 2014: 1). In the words of John Entelis (2011: 675):

The recent memory of the civil war in the 1990s that nearly tore the country apart and left nearly 200,000 people dead hangs over the national consciousness serving as a brake to large-scale domestic violence.

Needless to say, the civil war was a crucial turning point in recent Algerian history, producing enduring effects that have to be assessed rather than left as ghosts (see section 4 in this chapter for a detailed description of this event and its consequences). However, given the unfalsifiable character of the “civil war hypothesis”, this is a difficult ask. An interesting solution to the fact that scholars are often unable to falsify a statement in a linear way has recently been provided by Mahoney’s (2010: 125-131) concept of “auxiliary outcomes”. Although these are not part of the main causal sequence, they provide valuable inferential leverage. In our case, for instance, the hypothesis of the civil war having acted as a brake would be disproved if in the years after the civil war’s conclusion, the 2000s, there was a constant presence of social and political violence, protests, and upheavals. This was exactly the case. To begin with, the powerful movement that developed in 2001 in Kabylia – the largest Berber-speaking region of the country – has to be considered. Although it remained

confined to the region for over seven weeks, the movement was a serious threat to the regime. Huge manifestations were seen in Tizi Ouzou (500,000 participants on May 21) and Algiers (200,000 demonstrators on May 31 and probably even more on June 14), and the response of the regime was brutal. Eventually, more than a hundred protesters were killed and thousands arrested (Roberts 2003: 292-296; Le Sueur 2010: 84)⁵⁸. Riots have also been a frequent and regular feature of the Algerian political landscape in the new millennium, leading to the *culture de l'émeute* that sees direct action as the only tactic that works (Toualbi-Thaalibi 2006)⁵⁹. In 2010 alone, more than 10,000 protests and public incidents were recorded (Bennadji 2011: 263). In short, the majority of the Algerian society was in a continuous state of revolt against the regime throughout the decade, showing that the supposed fear of a new escalation towards endemic political violence is a weak, if not completely inaccurate, explanation of the stability of the authoritarian regime in 2011.

Another relevant and recurrent explanation of the Algerian regime's ability to weather the storm was its prudent and strategic use of coercive apparatuses (Brown 2011b: 15; Achy 2013: 12; Volpi 2013: 107). According to this view, the regime's decision to target key urban spaces and institutional buildings, while peripheral districts were simply abandoned to rioters, was crucial for reducing those situations of direct confrontation between police officers and protesters that could ignite the country. Many scholars who have embraced this perspective have been inspired by the authoritarian learning approach developed by Heydemann and Leenders (2011; 2014). The idea proposed by the two authors is simple and powerful: the snowball effect that brought many people, inspired by the Tunisian and Egyptian events, to take to the street and adopt similar strategies of protest was mirrored by a similar process of learning among the elites. Nevertheless, the attempt to apply these insights to the Algerian case reveals some difficulties. Some of these are merely chronologic. Algeria was the second country in the region to be affected by vast and radical agitations when Ben Ali was still in power and Tahrir Square was simply one of the most congested roundabouts on the earth. It is

⁵⁸ Unequivocally, the violent behaviour of the police, who shot dead a young school student on April 18, 2001, and physically assaulted four days later another three students, was the spark for the protests. Yet, the underlying reasons were not principally related – as often believed – to the mistreatment of Berbers and the non-recognition of their language, Tamazight. On the contrary, as Roberts (2003: 292-93), Werenfels (2007: 52), and Willis (2007: 232) have stated, the riots expressed a visceral refusal of *al-hagra*, which is the brutal contempt with which authorities treat ordinary citizens. If the protests, therefore, remained limited to Kabylia it was because the two parties interested in fuelling the protests – the FFS and RCD – were two Kabylia-based parties. Werenfels (*Ibid.*: 51) has also shown that in key political and military positions Berbers were not underrepresented.

⁵⁹ However, this is anything but a recent phenomenon in Algeria. Bertrand Badie, quoted in Chikhi (1991: 10), used this expression as early as 1986. This demonstrates that there is a long tradition of rioting in the country.

hard to believe, in this regard, that the regime could have learned from something that had not happened yet⁶⁰. Other difficulties are instead related to specific shortcomings of the authoritarian learning perspective. Two of these are particularly serious. First of all, this approach images the authoritarian regime as a homogenous entity that learns and operates with a single logic and acts accordingly. In reality, the dominant coalition is made up of several different factions and therefore the balance of power among these and which ones experience – when and if this is present – a process of learning is crucial⁶¹. Secondly, the attention dedicated to the opposition camp is scarce, if not completely null. Analysing just the regime's behaviour and ignoring the challengers, the authoritarian learning hypothesis is subjected to the problem of equifinality – that is, different combinations of independent variables lead to the same outcome (King, Keohane and Verba 1994: 87-89; Ragin 2000: 50-51; Ragin 2008: 63). As probably experienced by many readers, it is common to find contradictory statements that underline the notion that lethal violence put in place by the regime strengthens protest movements in some circumstances, while breaking the backbone to these in others. This should not be overly surprising. After all, as long as the internal composition and strength of the protest movement is completely overlooked, a similar regime's behaviour might lead to completely different outcomes or, on the contrary, different degrees of repression can bring about the same result. As powerfully shown by the Algerian case, the regime was able to survive through both overall repression – as happened in 2001 – and moderate response – as was the case in 2011. The question 'was the prudent behaviour adopted by the regime decisive?' can only find probabilistic answers.

Finally, many scholars have underlined the rentier nature of the Algerian state as an important element of stability for the country (Achy 2013: 10; Volpi 2013: 100; Hill 2016: 128-129). Benefitting from the constant high level of hydrocarbon prices throughout the 2000s, it has been argued, the government was in a position to concede social and material rewards with the precise aim of weakening discontent. Despite the suggestive character of the claim, the development of the events does not fit well with this hypothesis. Whilst the state of emergency that had been in place for 19 years was effectively lifted on February 22 – probably contributing to undermining the already weak pro-democracy movement – a \$25 billion pharaonic plan, promising more social housing, higher public-sector salaries, and greater subsidies for basic food goods, was only made public in April, that is, when the wave

⁶⁰ Evidently, this kind of argument works specifically for the January events.

⁶¹ I wish to thank Brecht De Smet for raising this important point.

of protests had already ebbed. That said, this should not lead to the conclusion that being a hydrocarbon-rich country was not an asset for the Algerian regime. There are at least two other ways in which the oil and gas rents might have helped the authoritarian regime. First, the state budget dedicated to internal security was (and still is) extremely high in Algeria and this provided officers as well as rank-and file security personnel with the coercive means and personal interests to defend the system (Zeraoui 2012: 136-139; Achy 2013; Volpi 2013: 110). The consequent and expected absence of rifts, divisions, and defections in the coercive apparatuses is thus considered an insurmountable obstacle to the success of the protest movement. This general perspective is certainly agreeable. After all, it is widely known that as long as the regime is able to retain the loyalty of the men in uniform, no uprising can be successful. Nevertheless, the internal weakness of the Algerian protest movement determined that the Ministry of the Interior was not forced to call upon the intervention of the Ministry of Defence, as happened, for instance, in Tunisia and Egypt (Roberts 2011). In other words, the most problematic aspect in Algeria was the weakness of the challengers. This aspect – and probably this is one of the most interesting elements of the ‘unconventional’ rentier state theory – can also be regarded as the product of a historical bloc that is sufficiently large in social terms to prevent the formation of a powerful alternative coalition. Whilst the bulk of the academic debate has been concentrated on proving the existence of the relation between oil and mineral wealth and lower levels of democracy (Luciani 1990; Karl 1997; Ross 2001; 2012; 2015; Ulfelder 2007) or on disconfirming it (Herb 2005; Haber and Menaldo 2011), an important viewpoint has been proposed by those scholars who have assumed the effect of resource rents on political outcomes to be *conditional* (Dunning 2008: 5). Arguing against a “single set of effects”, Smith (2007: 6) has shown how timing and sequencing mediate the impact of oil wealth. In particular, when regime elites faced strong opposition and resource scarcity at the onset of late development, they had a strong incentive to build powerful institutions and robust regime coalitions. In these cases, oil wealth does not weaken states and regimes as soon as it becomes available. On the contrary, since rulers tend to reinvest late-arriving rents in the same institutions and coalitions, oil resources strengthen the regime, which in turn increases its ability to survive economic crises and political turmoil. By relying implicitly on several of Smith’s insights, Karl (2007: 15) argues that in oil-rich countries “the emergence of a strategic opposition coalition, so essential to pushing liberalization into democratization, is especially difficult to achieve”. This is not only the effect of the establishment and consolidation of a powerful ruling coalition, but also the product of a “distorted” class structure. In these countries, in fact, since the elite in control does not exploit

the population because it does not need to, the main task of the state is allocative rather than extractive (Luciani 1990). The consequence is the non-formation of an independent bourgeoisie and the lack of any serious class conflict, given the specific morphology of the working class (Delacroix 1980: 9-11; First 1980: 120). This is split between a minuscule and generously remunerated layer in the hydrocarbon industry (substantially the only productive sector of the whole economy) and an elephantine and unproductive tertiary sector. It is precisely the distortive influence of hydrocarbon rents on the social structure of a country that turns out to be an interesting starting point.

3. The political economy of Algeria's aborted uprising

3.1 Boumedienne's state capitalism

On July 3, 1962, Algeria, as the unequivocal result of the referendum on self-determination that had taken place two days before, became independent, and one of the most violent and long-lasting colonizations came to an end. Despite this extraordinary achievement, after 132 years of French domination and nearly eight years of brutal war, the challenges faced by the first government of independent Algeria were enormous.

The pre-capitalist society in Algeria was literally disrupted by the arrival of the French in 1830, who transformed the country into a commodity-extracting hinterland for the *metropole* and an importer of manufactured consumer goods (Bennoune 1985: 188; Lowi 2009: 52). In addition, Algeria became a perfect example of a settlement colony where at the outbreak of the independence war nearly one million Europeans lived – that is, about one-tenth of the whole population⁶². Many settlers occupied prominent positions in the administrative and economic sectors and the precipitous departure of about 90 per cent of them – for instance, 328,000 left the country during the single month of June 1962 – was another serious blow to the Algerian economy, and determined the nearly complete standstill of the state machine (Stora 2001: 124). At independence, the unemployment rate amounted to more than 30 per cent only among the active male labour force, whilst all women and people under 18 years of age were not even considered. Moreover, during the last years of the war, there was a massive flight of private capital that determined the crippling of the economy, with the real value of

⁶² Significantly, by December 1848 Algeria had been declared an integral part of France and had been divided into three French districts (Cohen 2014: 55).

production falling by 30 per cent between 1960 and 1963 (Lawless 1984: 156). In the 1962–1963 period, construction and public works decreased by no less than 55 per cent, cement production shrank by about 60 per cent, textile factories operated at 58 per cent of their capacity, and the number of industrial workers decreased from 110,000 in 1962 to 80,000 in 1963 (Bennoune 1988: 98). To make things even worse, manufacturing was largely a subordinate branch of agriculture, with food processing factories, excluding hydrocarbons, accounting for 40 per cent of industrial output and providing employment for 25 per cent of the industrial workforce as late as 1966 (Akre 1992: 75). The so-called *autogestion* movement, which had emerged as soon as workers and farmers had resumed production out of necessity in abandoned colonial properties, was backed by Ahmed Ben Bella's government in March 1963. This was an instrumental attempt to gain workers' support at a time of deep political and social conflicts, rather than a sincere commitment to the principles of self-management (Lazreg 1976: 89-90; Lowi 2009: 85). Despite the international attention attracted by Ben Bella's policies, these remained erratic and proclamations surpassed by far concrete actions. According to Lawless (1984: 157), by 1964 between 345 and 413 industrial units had been managed by self-management committees, although this sector never reached more than 10–15 per cent of the total industrial workforce. This was due to the concentration of self-management in small-scale units, while the subsidiaries of large French metropolitan firms were untouched (Bennoune 1988: 110). Agriculture – where the government concentrated its efforts – was much more affected by this economic experiment. About one-third of the total cultivated area and nearly 200,000 workers came formally under the self-management sector, but the reality was more a transformation of these workers into state employees rather than an integrated and shared participation in the management. Ben Bella's attempt to enlarge the self-management activity at the expense of medium and large landowners found logical and sharp opposition from the latter, a powerful and well-organized social class. By the onset of the independence war, in fact, an indigenous rural elite, useful to the colonial government in searching for native allies, had already taken shape (Pfeifer 1985: 3). The rural middle and upper classes strengthened their position after the sudden departure of European settlers, who left behind properties that were taken over by these social classes. In the first years after independence, the 25,000 richest rural families concentrated in their hands half of the country's arable land (Bennoune 1988: 94). The opposition of rural elites to Ben Bella's government found some important social and political allies. To begin with, the newly formed native-based bureaucracy was in favour of an active and central role of the state in leading the country and therefore opposed the self-management experiment. Second, the

dictatorial posture assumed by the regime alienated the sympathies of liberal thinkers and forces, leading to a significant shrinking of its political bases of support. Third, the government's attempt to curtail the extraordinary power enjoyed by the military, due to the specific way in which independence had been achieved in Algeria, through the creation of popular militias alarmed previous allies of Ben Bella in the army. Finally, no less damaging for Ben Bella was his inability to build a powerful historical bloc and to find a solution to an economic situation that continued to deteriorate. These elements explained why the military coup led by Houari Boumedienne in June 1965 was bloodless and without any relevant internal opposition.

After having taken power, Colonel Boumedienne dissolved the Parliament along with the Central Committee and the Political Bureau of the FLN, concentrating all the political functions into the so-called Council of the Revolution, comprising 26 members and managed by Boumedienne himself. A new historical bloc – led by the armed forces and the bureaucracy that rapidly transformed itself into a state bourgeoisie – coalesced around an ambitious and hegemonic industrial development project, which included workers and the lower classes in a subordinate and passive position (Belalloufi 2012: 56-62; Hamouchene and Rouabah 2016: 671). The FLN became a bureaucratized and non-autonomous apparatus, while the UGTA (*Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens*) and students' organizations were brought under the strict control of the state, working as 'classic' transmission belts in the new corporatist pact that was implicitly stipulated between the state and citizens thanks to the adoption of state capitalism as the model of development. More specifically, the strategy chosen was based upon a model of unbalanced sectoral growth that became known through the concept of *industries industrialisantes* developed by – among others – French economist Gérard Destanne de Bernis. This theory relies on the expected 'multiplier effect' that investments in growth-generating activities should have on all the other sectors of the economy. Top priority was given to capital-intensive industries such as steel, heavy machinery, iron metallurgy, organic and inorganic chemistry and electricity (Bennoune 1985: 197). These basic industries were considered capable of reinforcing the integration of the national economy through the effects they produced 'upstream' – providing raw materials and machineries for other industries – and 'downstream' – stimulating demand for outputs (in the form of food for the growing industrial workforce) and inputs (with pumps, fertilizers, and the like) (Stora 2001: 152; Ruedy 2005: 217). The whole strategy was built around three basic priorities: capital accumulation over consumption; industrialization over agriculture; and

capital equipment over consumer goods (Cavatorta 2009b: 73). A crucial role was assigned to hydrocarbon rents paid in hard currencies, which would have helped Algeria to avoid the classic dilemma of resource-poor Third World countries of choosing between foreign investments and high state deficits. The whole project began with a modest “pre-plan” in 1967–1969 when nationalization of most foreign assets occurred, including mining, distribution of petroleum products, construction materials, fertilizers, metallurgy, and cement plants. By 1970, of the 700 to 800 French-owned industries that had been present in Algeria in 1963, fewer than 100 survived (Lawless 1984: 160). The process culminated in February 1971 when all the natural gas reserves of the country, as well as the transportation network of oil and gas pipelines, were nationalized. Even more importantly, the Algerian government declared unilaterally that 51 per cent of the two major French companies operating in Algerian oil production had passed under state control. Then, thanks to two four-year plans (1970–73 and 1974–77), industrialization began in earnest, with 420 industrial projects beginning operation and another 500 being launched (Akre 1992: 82). After just ten years, Algeria was an example of social development and industrialization for oil-rich countries. Between 1967 and 1978, the average annual growth of the economy was an impressive 7.2 per cent, industrial production doubled, and basic industries nearly quadrupled (Ruedy 2005: 219). The accelerated pace of development went hand in hand with a leap in non-agricultural employment, which experienced a dramatic increase from 730,000 in 1966 to 1,730,000 in 1977 (Lawless 1984: 180). The most rapid growth was in heavy industry, with 53,328 jobs created in mechanical and electrical construction and 74,492 in the hydrocarbon sector (Bennoune 1988: 143). As expected, between 1970 and 1977 the public-sector workforce expanded faster (115 per cent) than the private-sector one (84 per cent) (Dillman 2000: 18).

These impressive economic data were not, however, the effect of an accelerated capital accumulation. On the contrary, the two real driving forces behind this process were the astonishing amount of resources invested and the two global oil shocks that caused unprecedentedly high hydrocarbon prices. The industrialization strategy was little more than a gigantic spending programme, through which workers were hired liberally – receiving social and economic benefits in exchange for their political quiescence – and plants were managed in a way that ignored cost-benefit calculations (Alexander 2002: 320). In the 1969–1982 period, all state enterprises, excluding SONATRACH⁶³, the national oil and gas company,

⁶³ An exhaustive account of the crucial role played by SONATRACH in the development of post-independence Algeria is provided by Entelis (1999).

had negative operating surpluses every year except 1978 (Dillman 2000: 25). These tremendous deficits were refinanced through international loans – with the foreign debt that went up from \$2.7 billion in 1972 to \$23.4 billion in 1979 – and relied more on revenues derived from hydrocarbons. This, in turn, induced the regime to draw capital and labour away from agriculture and manufacturing, and to pursue an overvalued exchange rate (Stora 2001: 156).

All these factors penalized exports from all the other sectors, increasing production costs and limiting the competitiveness of Algerian manufactured goods (Cavatorta 2009b: 75). The latter were already at ludicrously low rates as a result of the partial utilization of industrial plants, which was a consequence of the low level of managerial, technical, and vocational skills, as well as a political decision to try to guarantee social peace. As unequivocally demonstrated by the fact that hydrocarbons accounted for 98 per cent of export earnings in the mid-1970s, Algerian industrialization was never a success story (Aïssaoui 2001: 13). In addition, Algeria's dependency on foreign markets was further strengthened by its agricultural crisis. This was mainly the effect of the so-called 'agrarian revolution' launched by Boumedienne in the early 1970s. Despite a socialist rhetoric based on expropriation of private holdings of absentee landowners and the creation of 5,261 cooperatives, Boumedienne's action was substantially an attempt to rehabilitate private owners, conquering the political support of middle and upper rural classes (Ruedy 2005: 222). Agriculture's share in GDP fell from 17.5 per cent in 1963 to 7.7 per cent in 1978. At the same time, whilst national production covered 70 per cent of food requirements in 1969, this proportion had declined to a mere 30 per cent by 1980. To make things worse, the exportation of agricultural products that were able to cover 98 per cent of the imports in 1967–68 had dropped to 11 per cent by 1978 (Lawless 1984: 177). This was a heavy burden on the state's coffers already oppressed by huge international loans. When, in December 1978, Houari Boumedienne suddenly died of a rare blood disease, a profound reshaping of the model of development was already on its way to being launched.

3.2 *Infitah* and civil war⁶⁴

The model of state capitalism chosen by Algeria had a paradoxical tendency to concentrate profits in the private sector, making internal pressures on market openings increasingly stronger as time went by. As brilliantly summarized by Dillman (*Ibid.*: 21), the contradiction of Algerian economic development was that “the public sector was engaged in impoverishing growth; the private sector was engaged in unproductive growth”. The measures adopted to foster the growth of state enterprises – from the expansion of basic infrastructure to controlled prices on raw materials, electricity, water, and transport – were also important pillars for the growth of the private sector. By the late 1970s, the latter controlled 40 per cent of industrial value added and provided about a quarter of all industrial employment (Lawless 1984: 171). Moreover, in certain branches of light industries – for instance, leather, shoes, and textiles – the private sector was largely dominant, finding profitable market niches at the end of the transformative process in a classic parasitic position (Pfeifer 1992: 107).

The emergence of a private bourgeoisie, concentrated in commercial and trade activities as well as in small-scale manufacturing enterprises, led to a profound reshuffling of alliances amongst the main components of the historical bloc. The process took shape throughout the 1980s, determining the end of the military-technocracy alliance and its replacement with a military-private bourgeoisie nexus (Belalloufi 2012: 61-70; Hamouchene and Rouabah 2016: 672). In addition, the previous historical bloc was saturated and started disintegrating, leading to the violent expulsion of industrial workers and to the dismissal of the existing social pact from which, in particular, new entrants in the labour market were excluded. This process was gradual in the early 1980s, accelerating sharply – as we will see soon – after the downfall of oil prices in the second half of the 1980s. The architect of this strategy was the new president, Colonel Chadli Bendjedid, who, despite a rhetoric based on continuity, tried immediately to roll back many of Boumedienne’s policies. This was certainly an attempt to reduce the country’s dependence on hydrocarbon rents and importation of agricultural products, as well as to devote more attention to light industry to find a solution to the frustrated consumer demands. Nevertheless, liberalization policies in the economic sphere fitted several aspects, reducing at the same time the power of Boumedienne’s omnipresent bureaucracy and providing also some plausible responses to urgent requests – first and foremost, an increasingly high state debt. It was also well time framed. After all, Keynesian-inspired

⁶⁴ For a detailed reconstruction through the instruments provided by Process-Tracing of the way in which the political opening in the late 1980s led to the outbreak of civil war see D’Amato and Del Panta (2017).

policies had been abandoned worldwide, and the IMF and WB had already embraced neoliberal mantras.

In the summer of 1980, during an extraordinary congress of the FLN, the first five-year plan (1980–1984) of Chadli's presidency was made public. It aimed at concentrating resources out of capital-intensive industries and towards social infrastructure, light industry, and agriculture. This was a timid but significant break with the recent past, although about 40 per cent of the investments were still devoted to industry. In particular, private-sector initiative was encouraged; state-owned enterprises were restructured and decentralized, with 66 public corporations being systematically broken down into 474 smaller enterprises; the use of existing industrial capacity rather than new public investments was stressed; price controls on fruits and vegetables were abandoned; and wages were set according to the production levels in each industry (Pfeifer 1992: 106-109; Murphy 1996: 181-183). At the same time, it should not be overlooked that public administration remained the main locus for finding an occupation for many Algerians. Between 1977 and 1987 those employed in administration, education, and health-care services grew by an astonishing 207 per cent, increasing from 385,024 to 1,180,259 (Dillman 2000: 18). In other words, the costs of liberalization were made public, while the profits became private. Although the results of the first five-year plan were largely disappointing (Bennoune 1988: 277; Ruedy 2005: 236), the pace of economic reforms sped up quickly in Chadli's second five-year plan (1985–1989). Investments in industry were further curtailed, while the attempt to revitalize agriculture with privatization of land and irrigation plans became an absolute priority for a country that by 1986 was importing no less than three-quarters of its food requirements (Murphy 1996: 185). Likewise, private initiatives in the economic field were incentivized and the promise to enhance the quality of social infrastructure was renewed.

The price of oil on the global markets started decreasing in 1985. Then, from December on it began to plummet and by the summer of 1986 it had fallen below \$10 dollars per barrel. To make things worse, the US dollar – the currency in which raw materials were, and still are, traded – depreciated in value by more than 40 per cent against European currencies, making Algerian importations from Europe more costly (Ruedy 2005: 245). The combined effect of these two elements determined the downfall of export earnings from hydrocarbon from \$18.2 billion in 1981 to \$7.3 billion in 1986 (Aïssaoui 2001: 15). Unable to borrow again on the international market, Chadli was forced to impose austerity measures. Investments for 1986 were reduced by a third, and imports were slightly cut in 1985 (5 per cent over 1984 levels)

and much more seriously in 1986 (15 per cent) and again in 1987 (27 per cent). As shown by Table 1, the economic and social consequences of austerity measures were significant. The growth of GDP slowed down from 5.2 per cent in 1984 to 2.7 per cent in 1985 and to 0.6 per cent in 1986. Then, it turned negative in 1987 and plummeted in 1988. Public enterprise layoffs eliminated 104,000 jobs in 1985–1986 and a further 32,000 in 1987 alone (Chikhi 1991: 23). Overall unemployment increased from 11 per cent to 25 per cent between 1984 and 1988 (Layachi 2001: 34). Those who did not lose their jobs suffered the diminishing purchasing power that stagnant salaries – the minimum wage increased by only 20 per cent between 1980 and 1988 – combined with a climbing inflation – more than 10 per cent annually in the same period – determined (Alexander 2002: 335). Moreover, the government’s sharp cuts to food subsidies led to a huge increase in many basic foodstuff prices in a society that, having put aside Boumedienne’s claims to fairness and sobriety, reached an astonishing high point of social inequality: the richest 5 per cent of the population earned 45 per cent of the national income, while the poorest 50 per cent earned less than 22 per cent (Layachi 2001: 34).

TABLE 1					
THE NUMBERS OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS, 1984-1988					
Year	Imports*	Exports*	External Debt*	Debt Service Ratio (%)	GDP Growth (%)
1984	9,234	12,792	14,766	32,8	5,2
1985	8,811	13,034	17,069	32,5	2,7
1986	7,879	8,065	20,566	51,0	0,6
1987	6,616	9,029	24,601	54,0	-1,4
1988	6,675	7,620	25,041	87,0	-2,7
Notes: *Data expressed in billions of US dollars					
Source: Ruedy (2005: 246)					

These social sufferings exploded into riots in the poorest quarters of Algiers, particularly in the Casbah, as early as 1985. In November 1986 student agitations took place in Algiers, Oran, Skikda, and especially in Setif and Constantine. The following year, in September, the protest wave reached Ain-Abid where thousands of people occupied the communal buildings for a while, inspiring inhabitants of other small towns to do the same in the ensuing months (Chikhi 1991: 12). Then, the organized labour movement made its appearance on the scene, with workers’ unrests that spread quickly from one economic branch to another and, by September 1988, the whole northern industrial zone of the country had been crippled

(Mortimer 1990: 163-164). On October 5, marches led by schoolchildren and unemployed young men turned into open and violent riots that mainly targeted public buildings, symbols of the state, and also luxury shops (Stora 2001: 195-197). The regime reacted quickly and declared a state of siege, yet demonstrations continued.

As stated by Mortimer (1990: 164), “the great tragedy of the October events lay in the regime’s resort to inexcusable atrocities in restoring order”. Arguably, this was a consequence of the new scenario that had taken shape since October 7, when the Islamists made their first appearance on the scene and rapidly took the upper hand in the movement, triggering a violent reaction from the army that had been deployed onto the streets. After hundreds of Algerians had been killed and thousands arrested, calm was eventually restored across the whole country in a couple of days. Despite this, a process of political liberalization was implemented by Chadli, who aimed to sideline the old guard of the FLN by depriving it of its political monopoly (Willis 1996a: 201-202; Alexander 2000: 480). A new constitution was approved, the one-party system based on the FLN was abandoned, and in the following months nearly 30 political parties were registered. Among these was the FIS⁶⁵, which achieved a sweeping victory in municipal and provincial elections in June 1990, receiving 4.3 million votes – that is, nearly twice more the 2.25 million preferences obtained by the FLN.

In the face of these unsatisfactory results, Chadli deepened his commitment to economic liberalization. In July 1989 unofficial talks with IMF executives started, the state’s monopoly on credit was ended, and controls over export-import and wage levels were relinquished (Willis 1996a: 202-204). Likewise, the increasing burden of the international debt, which jumped from \$17 billion in 1985 to \$24 billion in 1990, imposed a serious halt to the growth of public-sector employment, which declined by 8 per cent between 1987 and 1992, while the private-sector workforce enjoyed a modest increase of 26 per cent in the same period (Dillman 2000: 18). The promised parliamentary elections at the beginning of 1991 were postponed due to the massive domestic protests that took place in response to the Gulf War and, in particular, to the US-led intervention in Iraq. Subsequently, the government presented a new electoral law. This was characterized by majoritarian criteria and single districts, whilst

⁶⁵ The *Front Islamique du Salut* was, in spite of its populist and vibrant anti-regime rhetoric, a market-oriented and non-violent political force. In a similar vein, although anti-Islamist by nature, the army was open to Islamist participation in the political arena as long as it remained a minority force (Mortimer 1996: 21). It was the erratic and misleading actions undertaken by the dominant elite – who, incomprehensibly, tried to split the spoils of the system with the Islamists through majoritarian electoral laws – as well as the excessively confrontational stances assumed by Political Islam that polarized the institutional environment, favouring hard-liners in the military ranks and supporters of the armed struggle among Islamists (Willis 1996b; Cavatorta 2009b; Aït-Aoudia 2015; D’Amato and Del Panta 2017).

the number of seats was augmented from 295 to 542 and a much greater weight was given to those rural districts in which the FLN did well in 1990⁶⁶. This was a frontal attack against the FIS, which reacted by calling for a general strike of indefinite duration to begin on May 25. As laconically stated by Quandt (1998: 55), “this was probably the crucial moment in Algeria’s brief experiment with democracy”. On June 4, after ten days of militant protests in which the number of participants was vast, although substantially peaceful, under the pressure of the armed forces, the President declared a state of siege and clashes between the security forces and the FIS’s militants followed immediately. Fifty protesters were killed and hundreds arrested, but the political consequences were even more dramatic, sidelining the ‘moderate’ faction of the ruling elite and polarizing the political environment. Moreover, these events seemed to confirm to many Islamists what the most radical wings in the movement had already asserted: the armed struggle was not an option, but the sole solution to achieve power (Hafez 2000: 574). As early as mid-1991, at least two groups calling for an armed *jihad* had formed whilst the May-June events fostered the military’s view that the Islamists were a serious threat to the country. In short, the Algerian transition was already close to derailing. The last involuntary straw was the electoral results of the parliamentary elections held in late December 1991, when the FIS won a nearly overall majority of seats in the first round of the legislative elections in December 1991. On January 11, to prevent an Islamist majority after the second ballot, the army stepped in and forced Chadli to resign. It was a military coup. Violent clashes erupted between the security forces and Islamists throughout Algeria, the FIS was declared an outlaw, and a state of siege was imposed. Although the FIS in power might have represented a danger for liberal freedoms, it was the cancellation of the elections that triggered the explosion of violence (Hafez 2003: 43; Cavatorta 2009b: 145-147). By March 1992, the country was well on its way to civil war (Mortimer 1996: 26-27), a situation that was further aggravated, apparently paradoxically, by the FIS’s non-declaration of *jihad* against the military’s regime, a decision that resulted in the emergence of the GIA (*Groupe Islamique Armé*), which had organized itself by October 1992. The GIA was animated by an overall antagonistic stance against the regime and by its unwillingness to bargain (Hafez 2000: 578). Thus, when attempts led by the moderate wing in the military’s ranks to find a

⁶⁶ It is likely that Chadli did not opt for a proportional law because he was confident that the FIS would have been defeated in the polls. There were several reasons to think in this way: *a*) the FIS’s mismanagement of the Gulf crisis, with its extremely pro-Baghdad position that became a boomerang when the US-led coalition made profound inroads into Iraqi territory; *b*) the presence of new competitors in the Islamist camp – HAMAS and the MRI (*Mouvement de la Renaissance Islamique*) – that would have drawn votes to the FIS; *c*) the presence of some opinion polls that positioned the FLN ahead of the FIS; and *d*) an electoral law openly drawn to favour the FLN that would have further strengthened the aforementioned trends (Soudan and Gharbi 1991: 48; Roberts 2003: 68-73).

way out of the political standstill were pursued, they always resulted in disappointing developments, strengthening the position of those – commonly known as *eradicators* – who opposed any conciliatory initiative with the FIS, on the basis that this party was no longer able to halt violence. Its decreasing bargaining power determined the FIS's attempt to organize its armed wing – the AIS (*Armée Islamique du Salut*) – in the summer of 1994. However, not only was this move unsuccessful in assuming control of the armed rebellion, but it also led to several clashes with the GIA, thereby increasing the degree of random violence that was engulfing the country. The long-lasting Algerian civil war came to an end only in the early 2000s, after 200,000 people – mainly civilians – had lost their lives.

3.3 Deindustrialization and the lack of a powerful labour movement

After the military coup, France emerged as the largest donor and supporter of the Algerian regime, granting about \$1.5 billion in aid under the aegis of Crédit Lyonnais. Similar stances were also taken by Italy and Spain, but this was not enough to tackle an economic crisis that was further exacerbated by the debt burden and by the Islamists' uprising (Cavatorta 2009b: 156). External debt rose from \$26.4 billion in 1989 to \$28.7 in 1994, amounting to 67.8 per cent of GDP. Even worse, debt servicing, which absorbed 69 per cent of export earnings in 1992, had reached 92 per cent by 1994 (Ruedy 2005: 271). Likewise, economic growth was stagnant. In the whole period between 1990 and 1995, GDP grew by only 0.1 per cent, while industrial production shrank by 1.1 per cent. Economic reformers suggested working with international organizations to find a way out of an increasingly challenging situation, whilst those who were still loyal to the Boumedienist model rejected this hypothesis on the basis of defending Algeria's economic independence. The failure of the latter, who governed the country between mid-1992 and mid-1993, opened the door to the former, who immediately started negotiations with the Paris Club and the IMF. In 1994 Algeria signed a stand-by agreement with the IMF, committing itself to a comprehensive package of deep neoliberal reforms. Among these, there was the reduction of the budget deficit, unrestricted access to foreign investors, and privatization of state-owned enterprises. In the ensuing months, the legal framework for privatization was established and also large industries in some specific sectors (textile and agro-alimentary, mechanics, electrics, electronics, chemical, plastic, wood, paper and leather) were made ready for selling off. All the public enterprises were regrouped into 11 holdings entrusted with the management of the operations. However, the extremely

sensitive hydrocarbon sector, which accounted for 95 per cent of export earnings and 60 per cent of state revenues, was not included in the programme (Werenfels 2002: 7). At the same time, however, between December 1995 and February 1996, British Petroleum, the French Total, and the American Arco signed joint ventures with SONATRACH to drill Algerian oilfields (Hamouchene and Rouabah 2016: 672).

In the second half of the 1990s, macroeconomic indicators were stabilized, the inflation rate was brought down from 30 per cent in 1995 to 6 per cent in 1998, the Algerian dinar was sharply devalued, and the state budget experienced surpluses (Willis 1996a: 200). The social costs of these reforms were tremendous. Real public wages dropped by more than 30 per cent from 1993 to 1996, nearly 500,000 workers were laid off in public enterprises, and 12 million out of 30 million people were living below the poverty line (Dillman 2000: 29; Layachi 2001: 36). Moreover, the concentration of wealth in a few hands, a process that had already taken off during Chadli's presidency, deepened. By the late 1990s, the income of the poorest 10 per cent of the population was reckoned to be 2.8 per cent of GDP, while that of the wealthiest 10 per cent stood at 27 per cent (Ruedy 2005: 274). Despite these social grievances, the Algerian economy started recovering in the late 1990s. This was mainly the effect of the increase in hydrocarbon exports with the price of oil per barrel that skyrocketed from \$13 in 1998 to \$28.5 in 2000 (Lowi 2009: 141). In the same period, export doubled, the total external debt went down from \$30.7 billion to \$25.3 billion, and the debt service ratio fell from 42.1 per cent to 18.6 per cent (Ruedy 2005: 273). In addition, the recovery of macroeconomic indicators went hand in hand with two other processes. First, the government's investment expenditure in industry fell drastically. Whereas in the 1970s this hovered at around 55–60 per cent of the total budget, by the outbreak of the October 1988 events it had already declined to 25–30 per cent. In the second half of the 1990s this touched the lowest level – at least up to that point – of 4 per cent. Second, by 2001 the privatization process had not led to a single complete divestiture of shares of corporatized public enterprises (Werenfels 2002: 1). It is true that the situation was different for local state-owned enterprises – according to the Algerian Minister of Industry, 935 out of 1,324 of these were privatized – but the bulk of the industrial production was not concentrated there. By 1999, for instance and significantly, Algeria had privatized less than one-tenth of what Tunisia – a country about four times smaller – had done and about one-eightieth of what Egypt had done (Hanieh 2013: 50). In what arguably is the most well-conducted study on this issue, Werenfels (2002: 2-3) argued that three aspects contribute to explaining the outcome: *a*) the military's grip on power and

the absence of strong ties between an insulated bureaucracy and the private sector; *b*) the role of patron-client networks; and *c*) the still persistent post-independence ideology based on nationalist and collectivist views. In such a challenging environment for neoliberal reforms, the sudden and relevant increase of oil and gas prices became the crucial material support to avoid the IMF's recommendations. Nevertheless, the absence of privatization of state-owned enterprises combined with the withdrawal of the state from direct investments in the productive sectors triggered an unprecedented process of deindustrialization. While the value added by manufacturing to GDP had already declined from 14 per cent in 1985 to 11 per cent in 1990, it hovered around 7 per cent in 2000. Algeria was gradually, but significantly, distancing itself from Egypt and Tunisia, resembling accurately the most typical example of a rentier state in North Africa – that is, Libya.

Abdelaziz Bouteflika's rise to power in 1999 did not halt these trends. On the contrary, deindustrialization accelerated even more. The lack of interest in productive sectors was the effect of several interconnected elements. To begin with, by the mid-2000s oil prices had already surpassed \$50 per barrel and in the first months of 2008 an astonishingly high record of \$140/barrel was reached on the international markets. Gas prices did not increase by the same percentages, yet they rose substantially too. The logical consequence was that Algeria's exports boomed from \$21.7 billion in 2000 to \$78.6 billion in 2008, whilst external debt nearly disappeared, being put at 3.3 per cent of GDP in 2008 (IMF 2012: 4). Second, the key components of the historical bloc – that is, a comprador private bourgeoisie and the armed forces – had no interest at all in investing in new industrial projects, preferring diverted the state's resources in other directions and to its own advantage (Hamouchene and Rouabah 2016: 676). As clearly demonstrated by Table 2, whilst the government's investment expenditure in industry was reduced to just 2 per cent in the first Bouteflika mandate and disappeared completely in the second half of the 2000s, resources invested by the government in infrastructure grew from less than 10 per cent in the 1970s to 25 per cent in the late 1990s, and up to 40 per cent during the second Bouteflika presidency.

TABLE 2									
DISTRIBUTION OF GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT EXPENDITURES (%), 1970-2009									
	1970- 1973	1974- 1977	1978- 1979	1980- 1984	1985- 1989	1993- 1994	1995- 1999	2000- 2004	2005- 2009
Industry	56	58	59	32	23	5	4	2	0
Agri. and Fishing	8	3	4	6	5	2	3	4	2
Water Development	4	3	4	7	7	11	11	14	18
Housing	6	11	12	16	18	5	12	19	13
Education	9	5	6	8	8	13	14	14	11
Productive Service	8	10	5	11	7	0	0	0	0
Infrastructure	9	8	9	12	14	26	25	29	40
Urban Development	0	2	0	8	9	17	11	9	6
Not Allocated	0	0	0	0	9	21	20	9	10
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Notes: Data are not available for the period 1990-93									
Sources: 1970-97 figures from Dillman (2000: 22-23); 1998-2009 IMF (2003: 56; 2012: 23)									

Pharaonic and largely useless public works – impressive motorways, mosques, residential projects in trackless zones, and the like – financed by the state and realized by private companies became therefore the instrument to foster private enrichment of well-connected businessmen to high-ranking officials – especially in the armed forces – in an environment characterized by corruption and clan struggles. Likewise, retired or currently serving officers became *godfathers*, obtaining the appropriate licences in trade and commercial activities and benefitting from an opaque process of economic opening (Cook 2007: 45). Therefore, rents derived from the hydrocarbon sector were no longer used to foster an ambitious process of development and industrialization, but were indirectly appropriated and circulated between the military and a parasitic and unproductive private bourgeoisie, including high-ranking bureaucrats who did not oppose the new curse (Dillman 2000: 3).

As already stated, the process of deindustrialization was not merely the effect of the state's retreat as the main actor in the economic sphere, but also the product of the lack of privatization. In other words, the significant industrial complex that the country had built in the 1970s was neither renovated nor privatized. It was made to disappear throughout the 1990s and 2000s, when it was simply abandoned by the ruling elite. It is certainly true that a couple of relevant privatizations took place in the mid-2000s – from telecommunications to cement and metallurgy – yet the hydrocarbon industry was never touched and between 2006 and 2009 the whole process of privatization slowed down significantly (Ruedy 2005: 272). As

shown in Table 3, between 2000 and 2008, the total value of privatization in Algeria was \$1,702 million – that is, one-sixth, a quarter, and half of what Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia did in the same period, respectively (Hanieh 2013: 50).

TABLE 3											
PRIVATIZATION IN US\$ MILLION, 1988-2008											
	1988-1998	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2000-2008
Algeria	55	7	369	0	360	421	384	0	161	0	1,702

Source: Hanieh (2013: 50)

As a logical consequence of these developments, the value added by manufacturing to GDP shrank again throughout the 2000s and eventually reached the lowest level of 5 per cent in 2010 (Table 4) (Bouyacoub 2012: 86). This is even more significant given that, while manufacturing lost one-third of its value added to GDP, hydrocarbon activities fell too, demonstrating that the process of deindustrialization was not the artificial product of a sudden leap in hydrocarbon rents, but something real and concrete⁶⁷.

TABLE 4			
ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES VALUE-ADDED AS PERCENTAGE OF GDP, 1990-2010			
	1990	2000	2010
Agriculture	11,3	8,9	8,4
Industry	48,2	58,6	56,2
of which manufacturing	11,4	7,5	5,0
of which hydrocarbon	22,6	39,2	34,7
Services	40,5	32,5	35,4

Source: Bouyacoub (2012: 86)

By isolating manufacturing from the rest of the Algerian economy and providing a historical account of it, this aspect is fully confirmed. As shown by Table 5, in 2010 manufacturing production was about half of that in 1989, whereas in the same period the industrial sector as a whole, excluding hydrocarbon, declined by nearly a quarter. This trend, with some particular exceptions, was common to many sectors and almost led to the entire evaporation of textile, leather, shoe, wood, and paper industrial activities. Moreover, it should also be borne in mind that industrial output had already declined by 5.5 per cent between 1984 and

⁶⁷ In 2010, oil and gas prices depreciated significantly, losing about half of their value in comparison to 2008.

1991, meaning that manufacturing production lost over 50 per cent of its capacity in just 25 years.

TABLE 5					
DEVELOPMENT OF INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION, 1989-2010					
	1989	1995	2000	2005	2010
Industries (non-hydrocarbon)	100	82,9	75,0	77,0	76,8
Manufacturing	100	78,9	66,8	59,4	50,7
By Sector					
Water and Energy	100	132,4	171,3	231,7	309,8
Mines and Quarry	100	81,1	79,6	96,0	132,8
ISMMEE*	100	74,5	56,6	65,6	55,0
Construction Materials	100	89,7	97,1	125,0	107,4
Plastic Chemicals	100	86,2	97,2	83,7	63,0
Agro-Food	100	89,0	85,5	34,6	30,3
Textiles	100	73,1	33,4	25,7	16,4
Leather and Shoes	100	42,6	15,5	11,0	6,2
Wood and Papers	100	60,1	35,6	25,9	18,4
Other Industries	100	46,6	26,5	19,1	8,1
TOTAL	100	87,6	85,2	93,0	89,9
Notes: *(Iron, Steel, Metals, Mechanical, and Electrical Industries); 1989=100					
Source: 1989-2000 figures from Bouzidi (2008: 20) 2001-2010 ONS (2013: 26-27)					

As logically expected, the process of deindustrialization went hand in hand with a reduction of the number of employees in manufacturing, who declined from 16.4 per cent in 1987 to less than 9 per cent in 2010. The combination of de-industrialization and the inability of the public sector to offer jobs to all of the hundreds of thousands who entered the labour market every year led to the development of two phenomena⁶⁸. First, there was an explosion of non-permanent job positions, which skyrocketed from 6.2 per cent in 1992 to 30.1 per cent in 2010, of which more than 80 per cent were in the private sector (Table 6).

⁶⁸ As will be analysed at length in the next section, the state's withdrawal as main employer was much less significant in Algeria than, for instance, in Tunisia and Egypt. Despite this, the general trend was the same in Algeria too, making it difficult for the youth, especially those with a higher education, to find a decent and well-paid job.

TABLE 6				
STRUCTURE OF THE ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE POPULATION, 1966-2010				
	1966	1977	1992	2010
Employers	0,5	0,4	2,2	3,7
Independents	19,4	18,8	21,6	22,9
Permanent Workers	28,1	46,8	42,2	29,7
Non-Permanent Workers	12,9	9,5	6,2	30,1
Domestic Workers	6,2	2,5	6,5	3,7
Unemployed	32,9	22,0	21,3	10,0
Source: Bouyacoub (2012: 87)				

Second, the informal sector also expanded, with an increasing number of Algerians trying to earn a living, often in a grey area between legal and illegal activities. This is not to say that the black market did not exist in the first decades after independence; yet the phenomenon exploded in the early 1990s. It was calculated, for instance, that the cash circulating in the informal sector was more than 50 per cent of the fiduciary circulation (Dillman 2000: 26). Finding precise numbers to measure the size of the hidden economy is by definition difficult, given the opacity of the sector; however, the number of Algerians who made their living thanks to the parallel economy increased significantly from 33.5 per cent in 2001 to 41.3 per cent in 2005, and up to 45.6 per cent in 2010 (ONS 2012b: 11).

The strategical and numerical reduction of blue-collar workers was crucial in determining their docility throughout the 2000s. This is not to say that objective and structural conditions magically mobilize workers. After all, these are complex social phenomena that depend on several factors, ranging from cultural heritage to ideology, from workers' lived experiences to their organizational capacities. A radical labour movement is precisely the product of a specific and largely unique combination of all these elements. At the same time, it should not be overlooked that structural conditions remain decisive. In short, no labour movement can develop without the presence of those necessary conditions that make it possible for workers to act collectively and express their disruptive power. Two of these structural conditions are crucial. To begin with, workers' labour has to be indispensable to the creation of value. However, this was not the case in Algeria, where 97 per cent of exports and two-thirds of government receipts were derived from the oil and gas sectors in the 2000s (Darbouche 2011: 8). Additionally, not only did industrial workers in Algeria shrink in numerical terms and disappear from the public discourse, but they also did not suffer – as was the case, for instance, in Egypt and Tunisia – a higher degree of exploitation or a significant worsening of

their living conditions in the pre-2011 period. Although the comprador bourgeoisie-military nexus did not propose a new nationalist project based on internal legitimacy and hegemony, the link that it established with foreign capital and multinationals did not penalize workers immediately and directly. This was because international investors were not interested in taking up state-owned manufacturing activities, but rather in carving out niches in the much more profitable oil and gas sectors. Moreover, when foreign companies opened up subsidiaries in Algeria they almost never transferred parts of the production in the country, which was simply used as an outlet to sell expensive goods to a tiny affluent elite.

The second condition, in contrast, deals with the lack of favoured sectors among workers. This aristocracy of labour is likely to exhibit a strong lack of solidarity with other workers, perceiving that its own interests are better served by supporting the regime rather than challenging it (Bellin 2000: 183)⁶⁹. This was exactly the social and economic position enjoyed by those 146,239 workers who were employed in the hydrocarbon sector and who found themselves in relatively better conditions than workers in the private and informal sector.

This tiny minority of the Algerian working class – 2.2 per cent, according to the official statistics, but much less when taking into consideration the parallel economy and excluding cadres in the hydrocarbon industry itself – produced about 33 per cent of the country's wealth. This put them in the classic strategic position of being able to affect national politics through mobilization and strikes, yet these workers remained silent in the pre-2011 period. The main reason for this lies in the notoriously better, comparatively speaking, social and economic conditions enjoyed by this numerically limited but strategically crucial part of the Algerian working class. At the outset of the Arab Uprising, for instance, workers in the hydrocarbon sector earned on average 59,064 DA (Algerian dinar) – that is, nearly four times more than those employed in agriculture (DA 17,298) and more than twice as much as blue-collar workers in manufacturing (DA 27,867) (ONS 2012a: 12). This favoured sector demonstrated a great lack of solidarity, refusing to mobilize against the regime and preferring, on the contrary, to indirectly support it. The logical result was therefore that the Algerian working class remained docile. Unfortunately, there are no available data to unquestionably prove it. However, two important clues can be pointed out in this regard. As shown by Table 7, in which strikes and lockouts between 1989 and 2004 are reported, the general trend is

⁶⁹ In the first section of this chapter it has already been pointed out that the presence of an aristocracy of labour has to be considered a penalizing, rather than an insurmountable, condition for the development of a powerful labour movement.

absolutely clear. While they skyrocketed during the failed democratic transition, with over 2,000 in 1989 and 1990, strikes and lockouts decreased constantly after the military coup, hovering around 400 per year in the first half of the 1990s. Moreover, and perhaps rather surprisingly, as soon as the civil war decreased in intensity and social order was restored throughout the country, the labour movement slowed down too, reaching the lowest level in 2003 when just 23 strikes were registered.

TABLE 7								
STRIKES AND LOCKOUTS, 1989-2004								
	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Events	2290	2023	1034	493	537	410	432	441
	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Events	292	195	173	187	176	175	23	35
Source: ILO Laborsta								

The second important element that increases significantly our confidence in stating that the Algerian labour movement was weak in the 2000s is the careful work that has been conducted on secondary sources. Not only, in fact, has no scholar who has analysed the Algerian political trajectory in the last few decades underlined any significant labour protest, but a rigorous review of Algerian newspapers leads to the conclusion that workers' mobilizations between 2005 and 2010 were sporadic and scarcely militant. Arguably, there is just one important exception to this trend. On January 4, 2010, in the heavily industrialized area of Rouïba, in the eastern suburbs of Algiers, workers of the state-owned factory SNVI – Algeria's National Industrial Vehicle Company – went on strike (Gashir 2010). A couple of days later, other factories in the area joined the protest. By mid-January the movement had not only already spread to the ten other SNVI units located in different parts of the country, but also teachers and public health workers took to the streets (*Ibid.*). By the end of the month, however, protests had already declined significantly. It can be stated in this regard that the main missing element in the non-formation of a cross-class coalition was the Algerian working class. It is significant to underline here that not only did industrial workers, deeply affected by the unprecedented process of deindustrialization that hit Algeria from the mid-1980s, remain docile, but also white-collar state workers showed 'restraint'. In other words, two of the most important engines of the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings were both absent in Algeria, determining that disgruntled young people protested alone without finding support

from any other social class. Needless to say, this was never enough to seriously threaten Bouteflika's authoritarian regime, let alone bring it down.

4. A fragmented opposition camp and the weakness of the pro-democracy movement

Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, where powerful pro-democracy movements unfolded in the 2000s, in Algeria such a phenomenon did not take root. In addition, whilst newborn organizations were established in Egypt (Kefaya and its numerous offshoots) and in Tunisia (the 18 October Coalition), the CNCD in Algeria was formed only after the sudden outburst of protests in early January had already taken place (Butcher 2014: 734; Northey 2017: 216). The lack of a middle-class pro-democracy movement focused on institutional and procedural issues was mainly the product of a challenging political environment and resulted in being fatal for the establishment of a broad opposition coalition. In turn, this was both a direct legacy of the still-too-recent civil war and an effect of the specific institutional environment that developed from the mid-1990s onwards. In such a context, the establishment of a cross-ideological coalition through which all opposition forces could jointly mobilize against the regime was particularly difficult to achieve.

In January 1992, the military's decision to stop an electoral process that was leading to an overall Islamist victory was applauded by a range of domestic and international actors. Among the former, at least three constituencies emerged: *a)* the intellectual, French-speaking community, comprising liberal thinkers and feminist associations; *b)* the organized labour movement; and *c)* the Berber community of Kabylia. It was among the ranks of this latter group that the most vociferous supporter of the military intervention emerged. Saïd Sadi, the leader of the RCD party, proclaimed categorically four days after the FIS's sweeping victory in the December parliamentary elections, "I do not want to go to my country's funeral", and explicitly invoked the military's 'help' (Cavatorta 2009b: 135). This position reflected the commitment of the RCD to realizing a secularist state inspired by the French model and based on a rigid separation between religion and the state. It was joined in its stance by the PAGS (*Parti de l'Avant-Garde Socialiste*), an evolution of the old Communist party of Algeria, which was dismantled after the achievement of independence and therefore was forced to

operate just beneath the surface after it had renamed itself⁷⁰. However, these political positions were not supported by the other non-Islamist parties, which resisted the idea of both an Islamic state and a secular one. In this heterogeneous group, Hocine Aït Ahmed and his FFS took the lead. On January 2, 1992, while rumours of an imminent intervention by the military were escalating, the FFS organized what arguably became the largest manifestation in Algerian history inspired by the slogan “neither with the Islamic republic nor with the police state”. Similar positions were embraced, although within a range of particularly wide nuances, by the Trotskyist Workers’ Party (PT), by Ahmed Ben Bella’s *Mouvement pour la Démocratie en Algérie* (MDA), and also by the FLN (Roberts 2003: 164-167). It can be stated in this regard that the transition period polarized the opposition camp, introducing the prominence of an issue – the role of religion in the Algerian state – that crossed and split the traditionally homogenous political families. The contrast that had already emerged, however, only became a long-lasting division after the military’s intervention, fuelling reciprocal distrust among opposition parties. Moreover, the frontal confrontation between the security forces and the armed Islamist groups fostered a zero-sum game in which all social and political forces were forced to take a clear position. The most important case in point here is by far that of the UGTA. The organized labour movement was never in favour of a secular state and thus it had not immediately joined the RCD and Ettahaddi in their vocal support for the military coup. However, as soon as the civil war became more violent and Islamists extended their attacks on school and school employees – a traditionally highly unionized sector in Algeria – the UGTA backed the military nearly by default⁷¹. Between 1992 and 1995, for instance, about 950 schools were sabotaged and by 1993 violence had started hitting representatives of opposition groups, foreigners, journalists, and intellectuals (Hafez 2000: 584). The escalation of violence polarized even more the Algerian political environment, which was divided into pro and against the relegalization of the FIS, an issue that crossed and split the traditionally homogenous political families (Table 8). The position of the various political forces emerged with a high degree of clarity during the talks that took place in Rome under the auspices of the Sant’Egidio Catholic lay community and that led to the signature of a platform for a national contract on January 13, 1995.

⁷⁰ The PAGS split into three streams in late 1992. The most important one was *Ettahaddi*, which embraced similar critical positions towards Political Islam.

⁷¹ This move of the UGTA was also favoured by the decision of the FIS that during the democratic experiment opted for creating its own trade union – the Islamic Movement of the Algerian Workers, known through its French acronym SIT – rather than infiltrating the UGTA (Alexander 2002: 482). In the UGTA’s ranks there were certainly FIS supporters and sympathizers, yet the most militant Islamist elements had abandoned the UGTA and joined the SIT. The UGTA’s decision to back the military did not find any serious opposition in its rank and file.

TABLE 8					
THE ALGERIAN CHESSBOARD					
Ideological Family	Party	Relegalization of the FIS		Sant'Egidio Platform	
		Pro	Against	Pro	Against
Nationalists	FLN	X		X	
	ANR		X		X
Kabylia-based	RCD		X		X
	FFS	X		X	
Marxists	PT	X		X	
	Ettahaddi		X		X
Islamists	HAMAS	X			X
	MRI	X		X	
Liberal/Islamists	MDA	X		X	
	PRA	X			X
Non-party forces	UGTA		X		X
	LADDH	X		X	
Notes: The RND is not mentioned because it was only founded in 1997					
Source: My own elaboration					

The initiative brought together several Algerian political parties and movements that agreed to meet with exiled FIS leaders, formalizing the request for a return to democratic institutions through free and pluralistic elections (Ruedy 2005: 265-266). Among these forces were the FLN, the FFS, the MDA, the PT, the MRI, and the Algerian League for Defence of Human Rights (LADDH), whilst the RCD, Ettahaddi, HAMAS, the liberal Islamic PRA (*Parti du Renouveau Algérien*), and the UGTA declined to participate⁷². The Zéroual government quickly denied the political legitimacy of the Sant'Egidio platform under the pressure of the military's *eradicators*, who saw their return to the barracks as simply unacceptable at that time. However, the Rome agreement signed by several opposition groups forced the regime to find a political solution to its fading legitimacy. Since Zéroual had already announced in November 1994 that presidential elections would be held during the next year, the regime worked hard to fulfil this promise. Evidently, the return to the electoral process was all, but an attempt to restart the process of democratization was abruptly interrupted (Parks 2012: 107). The regime needed to re-establish its authority and, at the same time, break the opposition

⁷² In May 1995, former Prime Minister Redha Malek founded the ANR (*Alliance Nationale Républicaine*). The party, often considered an offshoot of the FLN, immediately assumed vociferous anti-Islamist positions and was strongly against the Sant'Egidio platform.

front that had been established in Rome. In this respect, apparently contested elections, animated by several candidates representing the various political tendencies of society, were required. As expected, those forces that had refused to meet in Rome were willing to participate. As the date of the elections was approaching, the government announced that Saïd Sadi for the RCD, Mahfoud Nahnah, head of HAMAS, and Nouredine Boukhrouh, leader of the PRA, were to take part in the contest (Ruedy 2005: 267). Despite the threats of the GIA and AIS, Zérroual's victory was clear-cut and in the new government portfolio positions were also assigned to HAMAS and the PRA⁷³. In this way, Zérroual was able to legitimate his role and to further divide the opposition front between the parties that had taken part in the elections and those that had boycotted them. Moreover, among the former there were also junior partners in the new cabinet. The 1995 presidential elections made it clear that the first post-coup period, characterized by the generals' direct grip on power in order to perform the essential task of tackling the Islamists' offensive, was over (Cavatorta 2009b: 169). The following transitional period came rapidly to an end with the 1997 parliamentary elections, when the founding principles of the new Algerian political system were definitively established. Although the institutions of democracy were reintroduced, they remained empty of their real content. Presidential and parliamentary elections were regular, although never free and fair. Three main mechanisms were adopted by the regime to manipulate elections and to produce predictable outcomes: *a)* the competition was pre-organized to favour those candidates and parties that were regarded as acceptable and not challenging to the regime⁷⁴; *b)* access to media and money was distributed unevenly and unfairly, favouring pro-regime forces; and *c)* simple poll-fixing was used (Volpi 2006: 445-450). Once elected, officials took regular control of their positions, but it is hard to believe that they were the real policymakers. In fact, the reserved domains of bureaucracy and especially of the military remained vast and untouched. In short, Algeria rapidly emerged as a "hybrid regime" (Diamond 2002) or "pseudo-democracy" (Volpi 2006), showing all those features that would have characterized its political environment up to the outburst of the Arab uprisings.

In particular, it is interesting to underline that the establishment of a cross-ideological coalition in which (nearly) all political forces are willing to mobilize against the authoritarian regime is less likely in illiberal multi-party systems, where the opposition is split into loyalists

⁷³ Zérroual obtained 61 per cent of the votes, Nahnah 25.6 per cent, Sadi 9.6 per cent, and Boukhrouh 3.8 per cent.

⁷⁴ In this respect, the most important case in Algeria throughout the 2000s was the exclusion of Taleb al Ibrahim – a moderate Islamist with a significant appeal – in 2004 presidential elections.

and radicals. While the latter are always ready to mobilize and capitalize on the exacerbation of social conflict, the former, who in general possess a greater organizational strength, know that they will pay a high price if they destabilize the system. In short, the fact that some elites are brought closer to the regime, while others are sidelined, means that the various forces of the opposition camp pursue different interests, thereby creating a serious barrier to the development of a 'negative coalition'. Second, the participation of opposition groups in rigged elections increases suspicions and distrust among political parties and society. Parliamentary elections were not only used as democratic facades, but also and especially as tools to co-opt opposition forces, providing a safety valve for uncontrolled social unrest⁷⁵.

From 1997 until the outbreak of the Arab uprisings, there were three legislative elections in Algeria⁷⁶. Even though the regime's parties – the FLN and the *Rassemblement National Démocratique* (RND⁷⁷) – have always obtained a limited victory (59.2 per cent of the seats in 1997, 63.2 per cent in 2002, and just 50.6 per cent in 2007), at least by the standards of an authoritarian regime, valuable support for the government has come from both independent members of the Parliament and from the great heterogeneity of the opposition forces, in which at least three camps can be easily identified.

⁷⁵ Presidential elections are not analysed here. As we know, after he was elected for the first time in 1999, Abdelaziz Bouteflika was confirmed as President in 2004, 2009, and also in 2014, even though a stroke had forced him into a wheelchair the year before. In general, frauds and coercive measures against opponents were much stronger in presidential elections, leading also to grotesque episodes, such as in 1999 when 24 hours before the elections Bouteflika's six challengers, accusing the regime of irregularities, withdrew. What is even more crucial, however, is the fact that the sensitivity of the role and the impossibility of splitting it made presidential elections irrelevant for the regime's attempt to divide and co-opt opposition forces.

⁷⁶ As expected, new parliamentary elections were regularly held in 2012. In sharp contrast to what happened in the first post-Arab uprising elections in many other North African countries – for instance, in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia – pro-regime forces emerged once again as dominant. Partially, this was the effect of a democratic opening that was much more modest in Algeria than in other countries. Yet, this was also the product of the relative decline of Political Islam as an electoral force (on this issue see Zhang (2016)).

⁷⁷ After having been nominated Prime Minister by President Zéroual, the hitherto nearly unknown Ahmed Ouyahia, together with other supporters of the regime, created his own party – the RND.

TABLE 9						
PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN ALGERIA, 1997-2007						
Parties	1997		2002		2007	
	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats
FLN	14,3	69	34,3	199	23,0	136
RND	33,7	156	8,2	47	10,3	61
ANR	2,0	0	/	/	2,2	4
FNA*	/	/	1,6	8	4,2	13
FFS	5,0	20	/	/	/	/
RCD	4,2	19	/	/	3,3	19
HAMAS/MSP	14,8	69	7,0	38	9,6	52
MRN/El-Islah**	/	/	9,5	43	2,5	3
MRI	8,7	34	0,6	1	3,4	5
PRA	1,9	0	0,3	1	1,8	4
PT	1,9	4	3,3	21	5,1	26
Independents/Others	13,5	9	35,2	31	34,6	66
Total Number of Seats	100,0	380	100,0	389	100,0	389
Turnout (%)	65,6		46,2		35,7	
Notes: the RCD boycotted the 2002 elections, while the FFS boycotted the 2002 and 2007 elections						
* the FNA (Front National Algérien) was founded by Moussa Touati in 1999						
**the MRN/El-Islah split from the MRI in 1999						
Source: Layachi (2013)						

To begin with, there is the Islamist bloc, in which there have constantly been at least two significant parties – Hamas and the MRI (*Mouvement de la Renaissance Islamique*), with their offshoots, respectively the *Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix* (MSP) and the *Mouvement pour la Réforme Nationale* (MRN) – which have generally tended to be on different sides with respect to issues having to do with practical policies, given also the collaborative stances that have led Hamas to obtain ministry positions on several occasions. There is also the secularist camp, where the positions are nuanced not only regarding the conception of the role of religion, but also in relation to economic and social issues, as well as whether to participate in the government. Broadly speaking, there are two parties that – although neither regionalist nor ethnic – are mainly Kabylia-based forces. This does not mean, however, that the RCD (*Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie*) and FFS (*Front des Forces Socialistes*) are similar. While the former has been in favour of a secular state and has also taken charge of portfolios⁷⁸, the latter has emerged as a much more tolerant

⁷⁸ The RCD entered the government's area in the last days of 1999 – a move that resulted in being particularly damaging for the party after the outburst of the Kabylia revolt (already analysed in this chapter) in the spring of 2001. The RCD withdrew its support for the government and tried to capitalize on its gains in the ongoing mobilization, calling – together with the FFS – to boycott the 2002 legislative elections. However, in the 2004 elections the RCD leader Saïd Sadi ran for the presidency, demonstrating the instrumental and short-lived

force with regard to Political Islam, and more inclined towards social justice issues and workers' rights. Finally, the post- and new Marxist world is no less divided than the other two, even though the Trotskyist PT (*Parti des Travailleurs*) has emerged as the dominant party, at least in electoral terms. All in all, the regime has encouraged rivalries and divisions in the opposition camp through electoral competition and the dichotomy of cooperation/non-cooperation with the government, thereby avoiding becoming the sole target of the opposition groups. As we have already seen in detail, some opposition forces became governing parties. The most important case was HAMAS/MSP, but also the RCD took portfolio positions on a couple of occasions. Despite the rhetoric used by these parties and the RCD's continuous swinging between participation and boycotts, these political forces were de facto co-opted by the regime. Something similar can also be stated about the MRN. Although this party never supported the government directly, the MRN gradually widened its platform to appeal to a larger and non-religious audience, ending up in the most unnatural alliance – at least for a vociferous Islamist party against the 1992 coup – with the secularist RCD in the 2004 presidential elections (Driessen 2012: 182). Therefore, only the FFS and the PT could be counted as true opposition forces. This was problematic not only for the confinement of the anti-regime front to leftist forces, but also because these two parties were often at odds on tactical issues (Werenfels 2007: 71-72). The most problematic one was whether or not to take part in rigged elections, largely because, while the FFS was keen to switch between the two positions, the PT was a stubborn supporter of the electoral farce. Evidently, this produced serious conflicts in the opposition camp and prevented the development of a common action against the regime. This is the first element that explained why the pro-democracy movement was anaemic in Algeria (Table 10). Another important factor was the distrust that the participation in the regime-led game created among the political forces as a whole and society. This, in turn, weakened the renewal of old political structures through the arrival of fresh forces from dynamic sectors – first and foremost, the youth.

character of the decision taken two years before. Significantly, the FFS, one of the few political forces that retained a certain degree of autonomy, boycotted the 2004 presidential and 2007 parliamentary elections.

TABLE 10					
THE ALGERIAN POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT, IN THE 2000s					
Ideological Family	Party	Political Placement			
		Regime	Semi-Opposition		Opposition
			Cabinet Positions	No Cabinet Positions	
Nationalists	FLN	X			
	RND	X			
	FNA			X	
Kabylia-based	FFS				X
	RCD		X		
Marxists	PT				X
Islamists	HAMAS/MSP		X		
	MRN/El-Islah			X	
	MRI			X	

Source: My own elaboration

Finally, an important scapegoat to divert people's disaffection away from the state was the opportunity granted by the regime for the creation of civil society organizations. Expanding in parallel with decreasing state intervention, Algeria's civic associations skyrocketed in number from 11,000 to over 73,000 between 1990 and 2006 (Liverani 2008: 31). As noted by some scholars, civil society institutions are not necessarily mechanisms of collective empowerment (Wiktorowicz 2000). On the contrary, when promoted and strictly regulated by the regime, they can become powerful instruments of state social control and weaken opposition groups through divisional and co-optation tactics⁷⁹. In other words, at the outbreak of the Arab uprisings the opposition camp in Algeria could not have been more fragmented. As succinctly expressed by Volpi (2013: 106), "nationalists, secularists, liberals, and Islamists distrusted each other as much as they distrusted the regime".

5. The limited narrowing of the ruling coalition

The numerical and social composition of the key parts of the historical bloc was not much larger in Algeria than in Egypt and Tunisia in the 2000s. In addition, having left aside any developmentalist project, the nationalist and hegemonic legitimacy through which the lower

⁷⁹ Recently, a much less pessimistic view on the potentially democratizing role of civil society in Algeria has been presented by some scholars (see, for instance, Butcher (2014) and Northey (2017)).

classes were instrumentally integrated in a subaltern and passive position was completely lost. Despite these evident shortcomings, the regime was able to maintain the loyalty of some crucial constituencies, making stronger – in comparison to Egypt and Tunisia – its ruling coalition and thereby preventing the establishment of a powerful cross-class and cross-ideological coalition that might have successfully challenged its rules.

As was the case in several other countries throughout the Middle East, the size of the security forces expanded significantly in Algeria from the mid-1990s. In less than two decades, they quadrupled their numbers, jumping from less than 50,000 police officers in 1994 to about 200,000 in 2012 (Achy 2013: 12). Moreover, police officers enjoyed comparatively good salaries – their minimum wage was 65 per cent higher than the minimum wage in the public civil service – and good career prospects (*Ibid.*). In December 2010, for instance, the government announced that the wages of police forces were to increase by about 50 per cent, including a three-year back-pay deal (Volpi 2013: 111). Algerian security forces had therefore the means and the will to repress, having also gained a lot of experience in the way in which contesters had to be tackled thanks to the wave of almost uncountable riots that hit the country throughout the 2000s. Although the size and role of the Ministry of the Interior grew in Algeria as it did elsewhere in the region, this phenomenon did not determine the partial political marginalization of the military – as, for instance, happened in Egypt. The armed forces not only gained a lot in economic terms from the process of opaque economic opening, but they remained one of the crucial – if not *the* crucial – components of the historical bloc. Some authors have tried to describe this as the product of the “birth right principle”, with a clear reference to the crucial role played by the armed forces in the liberation struggle (Koonings and Kruijt 2002: 19). This is certainly a good starting point, yet it remains weak on its own. After all, such a principle was no less present in Egypt. Seen in this light, legacies should not be considered eternal forces and their effects can last over decades only when they are able to reaffirm themselves. The civil war in the 1990s played a crucial role in this regard (Cook 2007: 32-62). Not only, in fact, did the guns completely obscure the realm of politics, but the armed forces grew in strength and numbers. Military spending went up from US \$622 million in 1991 to US \$1,119 million in 1993, exceeding US \$3 billion in 2001 (Cavatorta 2009b: 168). Even after the Islamists’ insurgency had receded by the early 2000s, the state’s budget dedicated to the armed forces was not reduced significantly. In 2013, for instance, Algeria had the seventh-highest military expenditure in the world and it spent, in terms of percentage, more on its armed forces than the US and Russia. Similarly, the size of the People’s National Army also remained impressive, totalling 140,000 active members and

100,000 reservists on the eve of the Arab uprisings (Achy 2013: 12). In addition to its actual repressive capabilities, the Algerian armed forces also possessed the willingness to take repressive action. As already seen in the previous sections, the military had strong material interests, benefitting a lot from the new economic course thanks to which they emerged as *godfathers* and had a direct interest in various public- and private-sector ventures (Dillman 2000: 3; Cook 2007: 44-45; Volpi 2013: 111). Moreover, within the armed forces, the power achieved by the Algerian intelligence service led by the enigmatic and super-powerful General Mohammed Mediène, better known as General Toufik, was extraordinarily high. As pointed out by Roberts (2007: 12), “since 1990, Algeria has had five heads of state, eleven heads of government and four Defence Ministers, but throughout this entire period the DRS (*Département du Reinsegnement et de la Sécurité*) has been commanded by General Mohammed Mediène”⁸⁰. Despite this impressive show of strength, after the gradual return to the electoral process started in the mid-1990s, the military’s apparatuses opted for “ruling but not governing” (Cook 2007), positioning themselves behind politicians and political parties. The control of the military was developed through a close cooperation with the President and the nationalist political elite, avoiding concentrating the people’s frustration on itself⁸¹. In conclusion, as succinctly summarized by Hill (2016: 129), “the Bouteflika regime has high organizational power. The armed and security forces each have extensive scope and strong cohesion. They are large and well founded”.

From the mid-1980s, the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of the Interior – with the latter always in a subordinate position to the former – allied with a new emerging private bourgeoisie concentrated in commercial and trade sectors. With some limited variations, this historical bloc closely resembled the Egyptian one. Yet, whilst the latter was defeated by the 2011 uprising, the former was able to weather the storm. To a large extent, this was the product of the weakness of the protest movement in Algeria. In the previous sections, the lack of a broad opposition coalition has been tackled, focusing on the structural and contingent aspects that prevented the emergence of a cross-class and cross-ideological alliance. However, reversing the point of view, it might also be stated that it was the presence of a robust ruling

⁸⁰ General “Toufik” was eventually sacked after more than 25 years in September 2015. For a brief sketch of his life see Keenan (2010), while for the political manoeuvres that led to Mediène’s retirement see Meddi (2015).

⁸¹ It should be noted that the relationship between the military and its political allies was characterized by disputes and reciprocal attempts to enlarge the zone of influence. For instance, Bouteflika was the army’s candidate in the 1999 presidential elections, but once elected he worked hard to free himself from the armed forces’ control. A detailed analysis of the political clash between Bouteflika and the military is provided by Werenfels (2007: 58-62).

coalition that precluded the unfolding of a vibrant protest movement. It is important to emphasize in this regard that the regime was able to maintain the loyalty of three crucial constituencies – civil servants, middle-class professionals, and ruling parties – throughout the 2000s.

Public-sector employees were a crucial sector in republican Algeria. They mushroomed in numbers and grew in political strength under Boumedienne as well as in the first half of the 1980s, emerging as a crucial actor in the ruling coalition. The reshuffling of the historical bloc in the 1980s – that is, from the alliance between the military and bureaucracy to a comprador bourgeoisie-military nexus – signified the political marginalization of those high-ranking civil servants who in the recent past had played a much more central role in the country's life. Despite this, thanks to its rentier state nature, the Algerian regime avoided the IMF's recommendation on reducing its role as main employer and renewed some kind of social pact with public-sector employees. On the eve of the uprising, for instance, 2.7 million people out of a total force of about 10.8 million worked in the civil service. Excluding those who were employed in agriculture (slightly more than 1.1 million people), this means 28 per cent of the Algerian labour force. Significantly, this was ten percentage points above the average of the Middle East and North Africa (Achy 2013: 14). Additionally, considering the public sector as a whole, the picture is even more straightforward. It is true that the number of people who found a job in the public sector had been in decline in the last few decades, going from an astonishing 64.8 per cent in 1987 to 57 per cent in 1992 and reaching slightly less than 50 per cent in 2010, yet this figure remained extraordinarily high. Public-sector workers enjoyed better salaries than those in the private sector and had full access to social securities and material benefits. The regime was therefore able to exploit its position as an employer and 'service provider' to shape the political behaviour of the country's public-sector workers, avoiding their confrontational stances (Hill 2016: 129).

The earnings from sales of oil and gas were also important in another respect, as they allowed the Algerian government to maintain an extensive system of subsidies. As made clear by Khan and Mezran (2014: 4), "direct subsidies covering food, employment, housing, and interest rates amount to 14 per cent of GDP [...] additionally, there are implicit subsidies, estimated to be another 6 per cent of GDP, bringing the total subsidy bill to 20 per cent of GDP". For instance, the price of regular fuel in Algeria was half the average price of other oil-exporting countries and almost a quarter of the worldwide average price, costing the government the equivalent of more than 6 per cent of GDP and 20 per cent of public spending

(Achy 2013: 14). In short, it was the still relevant role of the state as employer and the maintenance of an extensive system of subsidies that determined the limited degree of social protests and strikes staged by public-sector workers. In sharp contrast to Tunisia, where the role of white-collar employers was pivotal in the formation of that cross-class coalition that defeated Ben Ali's regime, and also to Egypt, where traditionally pro-regime state workers started protesting in the late 2000s, leading to the birth of the first independent trade union, in Algeria they remained docile, preventing the establishment of a broad opposition coalition.

A second important support for Bouteflika's regime was indirectly provided by middle-class groups and intellectuals. Whilst in the 1990s, the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes gradually sidelined professional categories that emerged as backbones of the protest movement in the 2000s – first and foremost, lawyers – in Algeria a significantly different trajectory was on the way. The outbreak of the civil war and the unfolding of the Islamists' insurgency with bloody attacks against university professors, judges, journalists, and lawyers pushed these groups to support – at least tactically – the military and then Bouteflika's government, emerging as key constituencies for the regime. In particular, whilst judges and lawyers were crucial in supporting the state's repressive action against the Islamists and political opponents in general, professors and journalists played an important part in the process of relegitimization of a regime that had been profoundly shaken and delegitimized by the October 1988 events. In Algeria, therefore, due to the specific political environment, cross-ideological cooperation within professional groups was logically prevented by recent events that fostered a long-lasting distrust between secularists and Islamists. The lack of mobilizations led by middle-class professionals was a tremendous blow for the emergence of a powerful pro-democracy movement that, as already seen, remained anaemic throughout the 2000s.

The third and last important constituency for the regime was represented by the two ruling parties –the FLN and the much more recently formed RND. Writing in the turmoil of the political crisis opened up by the October 1988 protests, Roberts (2002: 34-36) supported the view that a comparison between the ongoing process of political opening in the Soviet Union and in Algeria was largely meaningless. The main reason for this lay in the completely different roles played by the two ruling parties. Although the economic and political structures of the countries might have induced the proposal of a comparison, the FLN remained a subordinate and secondary actor with limited mobilizing capacities throughout the Algerian republican history. This is not to say that the FLN was irrelevant for the stability of

the regime, functioning as it did as an important transmission belt between the state and society and providing upwards social mobility for tens of thousands of Algerians (Werenfels 2007: 35). In sharp contrast to the process experienced by the RCD ruling party in Tunisia and its counterpart – the NDP – in Egypt in the 1990s and 2000s, the FLN was never transformed into an empty shell full of technocrats and crony capitalists. To some extent, this was the product of the much more limited degree of nepotism assumed by the regime. Bouteflika's attempts to promote his own relatives were constantly and successfully countered by the military, and, especially after his problematic surgery operation in November 2005, Bouteflika's position was seriously undermined (Entelis 2011). Whilst in Tunisia people were mobilized against Ben Ali and in Egypt against Mubarak and his son, in Algeria people tended to complain about *le pouvoir* – an undetermined and nearly mystic entity. Partially, however, the fact that the FLN did not experience a process of bourgeoisification – as, for instance, happened in Egypt to the NDP – was the product of the different economic model embraced by Algeria. As we have already seen in detail, the lack of a process of privatization and the crucial role played by the military as gatekeepers to rent positions in commercial and trade sectors weakened the relevance for entrepreneurs of having direct access to the presidency or to the ruling party. The FLN and the RND after its establishment in 1997 maintained their main role as structures for upwards social mobility. Evidently, the main features for career advancements in the FLN's ranks were no longer those required in the 1970s and having a university degree and speaking the language of reform were key attributes in the 2000s. However, as underlined by Werenfels (2007: 64), the government's ministries who were 'selected' by the Prime Minister – in a complex and unbalanced bargaining procedure between the military, the presidency, and the party – all came from the FLN, which remained an important constituency for the stability of the regime.

6. Conclusion

Following the downfall of Ben Ali and Mubarak, many scholars supposed that Bouteflika would have been the next one on the list. After all, he was governing a republican regime characterized by widespread corruption, a lack of transparency, high youth unemployment, and the elite's arrogant use of power. In other words, many of those conditions regarded as crucial by several analysts for understanding the blossoming of protests in Tunisia and Egypt

were also present in Algeria. However, these expectations quickly vanished as months went by and when it became clear that Algeria had already missed the Arab uprising bandwagon.

The authoritarian continuity in Algeria was, first and foremost, the product of the weakness of the protest movement, which was never strong enough to provoke a systemic crisis. In other words, the security forces deployed onto the streets by the Ministry of the Interior were able to successfully tackle the protests without any further help from the military. In sharp contrast to what was happening at the same time in Tunisia and Egypt, therefore, the Ministry of Defence was not directly part of the game. However, as long as the protest movement is not able to bring about a crisis in which the whole architectural building of the authoritarian regime is profoundly shaken, there is no possibility that the armed forces might mobilize their own potential for partially autonomous actions, turning eventually their weapons against those who should be protected by them. In other words, a situation in which the coercive apparatuses have to choose whether to defend or abandon the regime never materialized in Algeria in 2011.

The main reason for this lies in the non-formation of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition through which different social classes and political forces might mobilize jointly against the regime. Splitting this proposition into its two main components, the rather docile behaviour of the Algerian working class is immediately striking. This can be explained, in turn, by two largely interrelated factors. To begin with, the numerical and strategical marginalization of productive workers in manufacturing has to be taken into consideration. From the late 1980s, the decline of the government's investments in state-owned heavy industry was not compensated for in any way by the growth of the private sector, which remained concentrated in speculative and unproductive activities. This determined an unprecedented process of deindustrialization through which the country lost more than half of its manufacturing capacities in about 25 years. As expected, the process of deindustrialization determined a reduction in the number of employees in manufacturing, which decreased from 16.4 per cent in 1987 to less than 9 per cent in 2010. What is even more significant, however, is the fact that in a slightly shorter period – that is, between 1990 and 2010 – the value added by manufacturing as a percentage of GDP shrank at a faster pace, going down from 11.4 per cent to 5 per cent. In other words, not only did the number of blue-collar workers decline, but also their role in the production of wealth for the country decreased. Being no longer indispensable for the creation of value, industrial workers enjoyed a limited power in material and symbolic terms. The second factor was the presence of an aristocracy of labour – that is, a partially favoured stratum of workers – in the hydrocarbon sector, where a tiny minority of

the Algerian labour force produced an astonishing amount of wealth. On the eve of the Arab uprisings, Algeria was one of the less diversified economies of the world. As a matter of fact, hydrocarbon rents accounted for one-third of GDP, more than half of the government budget, and 97 per cent of export earnings (Darbouche 2011: 8). In other words, oil and gas were the only sectors in which workers, through their labour, were critical to the Algerian economy as a whole. Despite their positional power, the 146,239 workers employed in the hydrocarbon sector – that is, 2.2 per cent of the Algerian working class according to the official statistics, but much less when taking into consideration the parallel economy and excluding cadres in the hydrocarbon industry itself – did not develop radical practices, and remained quiet. Although several elements – from the geographical isolation of the oilfields to the significant presence of foreign workers – contributed to explaining this phenomenon, the main reason has to be found in the relatively favourable social and economic conditions enjoyed by oil and gas workers, who earned on average four times more than those employed in agriculture and more than twice as much as blue-collar workers in manufacturing (ONS 2013: 12). The marginalization of industrial workers and the presence of an aristocracy of labour strengthened each other, producing a reinforced effect that prevented the formation of a significant labour movement throughout the 2000s.

The silence of the *factory* was exacerbated by the rather docile posture assumed by white-collar workers. In sharp contrast to the key role played by, for instance, primary and secondary teachers in Tunisia, civil servants were not particularly militant in Algeria and their participation in strikes and protests remained limited. The non-politicization of white-collar workers was, first and foremost, the product of the persistence of a social pact fostered by the earnings from hydrocarbons. It was certainly much more restricted and less ambitious than in the past, yet still present. The withdrawal of the state as a main employer was limited, especially when compared to other countries in the region, and public-sector employees enjoyed – for the country's standards – decent salaries and good living conditions, and had access to social security and benefits. Moreover, the relevant direct and indirect subsidies granted by the state on basic foodstuffs, housing, and fuel provided important support for workers' purchasing power.

The lack of a powerful labour movement went hand in hand with the limitedness of a middle-class pro-democracy mobilization centred around procedural and liberal issues. This was mainly the consequence of the enduring distrust among opposition forces that prevented the establishment of a cross-ideological coalition. In turn, this was both a direct and indirect

legacy of the Algerian civil war that nearly tore the country apart in the 1990s. Starting from the former, it should be emphasized that all the main social and political actors were forced either to support the relegalization of the FIS – hoping in this way to halt violence – or to back the military’s repression, determining long-lasting rifts between Islamist and secularist forces, as well as within the two camps. However, the civil war also had an indirect effect. In its attempt to regain legitimacy, the Algerian regime opted for a controlled and limited return to democratic procedures. Needless to say, this was anything but an attempt to restart the process of democratization abruptly interrupted in January 1992. On the contrary, the existence of formal democratic institutions masked the reality of authoritarian domination. Elections became recurrent, although certainly neither free nor fair; and domains of military power remained vast and untouched. Concentrating effective power in the presidency (and also in less accountable circles beyond it), the ruling coalition used therefore the national assembly as a democratic facade and a tool to co-opt opposition forces, providing a safety valve for uncontrolled social unrest. Moreover, the presence of parliamentary elections put opposition forces in a difficult and potentially divisive position – in other words, playing the regime game in the attempt to achieve parliamentary seats, funds, and media visibility or boycotting the electoral farce *tout court*. Opting often for the former, opposition parties were seen as untrustworthy and co-opted by vast sectors of the Algerian society. To some extent, the anaemic mobilization of middle-class professional groups – lawyers, judges, journalists, and intellectuals in general – can be understood as a consequence of the still-too-recent civil war. In particular, many of these constituencies joined the ranks of the regime in the 1990s when the Islamists’ insurgency started randomly attacking public-sector workers and functionaries of the state, fostering the Islamist/secularist division and promoting an enduring distrust between professional members who came from different political traditions. The non-mobilization of middle-class groups was a tremendous blow for the emergence of a vibrant pro-democracy movement. As demonstrated by the fact that coordination among opposition was only established on January 21, 2011, this remained fragmented and feeble throughout the 2000s.

The weakness of the working class and the divisions between different political forces explain the isolation of those marginalized Algerians – either employed in the ever-growing informal sector or not employed at all – who participated in spontaneous riots in reaction to the state’s failure to provide basic goods and services during the first days of 2011. Being disconnected from political organisations and lacking support from other social classes, they were unable to

formulate or articulate political demands, and their activism vanished after nearly a week of random violence.

In conclusion, a couple of considerations on the historical bloc. In numerical and social terms, the alliance between a comprador and parasitic private sector, on the one hand, and the military, on the other, was not significantly larger than the ruling coalitions in Tunisia and Egypt. Moreover, the links between the Algerian historical bloc and foreign investors made the former's hegemonic position weak, as it was not supported by a nationalist and developmentalist project. Despite this, it was able to weather a storm that was fatal to other authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. The main reason for this apparently surprising outcome was the capacity of the Algerian ruling coalition to retain the loyalty of some key constituencies. In particular, two of these emerged as decisive. First, the FLN and partially also the RND were able to fulfil the traditional role of the ruling party or parties in authoritarian contexts – that is, providing a connection between the state and society, as well as guaranteeing upwards social mobility to loyal middle-class members. Second, professional groups, such as lawyers, judges, and journalists, stayed firmly – in sharp contrast to what was happening in Egypt and Tunisia in the same period – on the regime's side, fearing an Islamist takeover. These two constituencies were crucial not only in strengthening the grip of the Algerian historical bloc on society, but also in preventing any embryonic formation of a broad opposition movement, a dynamic, in turn, already made difficult by the country's specific productive structure.

Conclusion

Authoritarian regimes break down in many different ways. Sometimes they are defeated by military coups or by conspiracies that have emerged within the autocrats' inner circle. In personalistic or sultanistic regimes, it is often the sudden death of a charismatic leader that brings about a political crisis or even the collapse of the regime. On other occasions, the decline and fall of authoritarian regimes are anticipated by the emergence of rifts in the ruling coalition, often triggering a partial political opening that might end up in a full process of democratization.

This apparently congenital complexity was sharply curtailed by a group of leading scholars in the 1980s who, analysing transitions from authoritarian rule in several southern European and Latin American countries, concluded that the process is always the direct or indirect product of divisions within the dominant coalition. As has already been done by other studies, this thesis has challenged the attempt led by the 'transitologist school' – as it became commonly known – to establish a unique and recurrent path in the fall of authoritarian regimes, rejecting therefore a priori the possibility of constructing a general theory that explains all breakdowns of non-democratic regimes in different times and throughout diverse geographical regions.

The impracticability of developing a general theory that explains all authoritarian transformations is partially a product of the extraordinary political diversity across dictatorships. They may have legislatures, parties, and even recurrent elections that mask the actual authoritarian nature of the regime. They can be found in some of the poorest countries on earth and in some of the wealthiest states as well. They are sometimes built around a super-powerful and charismatic leader and on other occasions are the product of an enigmatic and collegial military junta. They can last decades, becoming fully institutionalized, or just stay in power for a few weeks or months. It is not surprising, therefore, that this incoherent category of regimes might be challenged by numerous sets of different social and political actors, making it impossible to point out a single and linear way in which the authoritarian domination terminates. As is well noted in a few words by Barbara Geddes (1999b: 1), "different forms of authoritarianism break down in characteristically different ways".

The heterogeneous character of non-democratic regimes, however, does not tell the whole story about the impossibility of advancing a plausible general theory about their termination. The causes of the ending of authoritarian rule vary because they are related to the historical circumstances and social structure of the countries involved. Such aspects are continually

reshaped by several different factors, making the attempt to provide a single and unique explanation fruitless. In addition, the more scholars tend to cross temporal and geographical barriers the more they increase the likelihood of dealing with different historical circumstances and social structures. It might sound discouraging for many to accept the idea of renouncing a general theory, yet this is simple proof of the complexity of the social world that political scientists have to analyse.

This thesis has shown that authoritarian regimes are not only defeated by elite negotiations or by a partial political liberalization initiated by the ruling coalition at a time when collective protests have already delegitimized the dominant coalition. As happened in Tunisia and Egypt, authoritarian regimes can also break down without pacts, negotiations, and compromises. Although this is a much less frequent path, autocracies are also defeated by mass-based uprisings in which the emergence of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition throughout (almost) the whole country imposes a regime change. It is true that in the last stages of the uprising in Tunisia and Egypt, the role of the armed forces was instrumentally crucial, forcing out of power the two long-lasting autocrats – Ben Ali and Mubarak. Nevertheless, it would be meaningless to talk about military coups. It was indeed the unprecedented crisis unleashed by the sudden and unpredictable irruption of the masses into the political arena that forced the military at the helm when all other institutional forces disappeared or were defeated by the uprisings themselves. The armed forces did not act autonomously, but rather they responded directly to a wave of non-violent street activism. In Tunisia and Egypt, it was the inability of the Ministry of the Interior (MoI) to successfully tackle the crisis that required the deployment of the military onto the streets. As soon as this happened, it meant that the crisis had already reached a systemic level and that the main institutional actor in charge of re-establishing order had become the Ministry of Defence (MoD). Due to the partially different nature of the two uprisings (see below for a detailed discussion on this issue), the disintegration of the MoI's apparatus was much faster in Egypt than in Tunisia, but in both countries the entry of the military onto the political stage was 'timid' and ambiguous. The arrival of the armed forces was welcomed with intense exultation by the masses, who hoped to receive protection against the police's brutality and therefore tried immediately to fraternize with soldiers. Despite this, for several long days the real intentions of the men in uniform remained unclear, with uncontrolled rumours being spread about the armed forces' contradictory behaviour. It is true that in general they did not repress protesters, but as demonstrated by several episodes – first and foremost, the so-called Battle

of the Camel in Tahrir Square on February 2, 2011 – their passive position did not amount in any way to some sort of protection for demonstrators.

The military, both in Tunisia and Egypt, gave the regime every opportunity to find a political solution to the crisis. It was Ben Ali and Mubarak's inability to restore order through a combination of concessions, co-optation of more moderate groups, and focused repression on radical forces that left the regime's survival in the hands of the armed forces' willingness to repress. The neutral stance assumed by the armed forces, therefore, became an implicit support for the uprising as soon as the political context was restricted to a zero-sum game in which the only remaining choices were either ferocious repression or the downfall of the regime. In their attempts to explain the military's apparently striking decision to sacrifice the once super-powerful autocrats who had been turned into lame ducks in a couple of weeks, many scholars have pointed to the degree of institutionalization or professionalization of the military itself. Evidently, had the armed forces been recruited on ethnic or tribal lines, they would not have abandoned the regime for the simple and evident reason that the survival of the latter was crucial to the survival of the former.

Having said that, concluding that the military's defections in Tunisia and Egypt were merely the product of their (relatively) high degree of institutionalization would be misleading. After all, it has to be remembered that the Tunisian army – regarded as the most institutionalized one throughout the whole of the Middle East – cracked down violently on mass-based protests on three occasions (1978, 1984, and 2008) in the last few decades. During the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, the military's decisions were neither inspired by the desire to stay on the protesters' side nor the product of a simmering conflict between the autocrats' clique and the armed forces, which suddenly became exploitable to the advantage of the latter. Moving beyond the simplistic representation of the army as a unique and coherent body, it should be emphasized that "officials issue orders, but subordinates execute them" (Nassif 2012: 20). Given that (nearly) all classes and political tendencies, claiming to be *the* people, were mobilized, had the two chiefs of the army's staff – that is, General Rachid Ammar in Tunisia and Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi in Egypt – ordered junior officials and rank-and-file soldiers to fire on protesters, it is likely that their commands would have been disobeyed and they would have had to deal with a mutiny in the military's ranks. In other words, the social and political conflict had already escalated to such a high level that the monolithic character of the armed forces was also deeply affected by the events. It might sound too strong a claim for some, but in the last days of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings,

high officers found themselves almost powerless, rendering it uninfluential whether Ammar and Tantawi were in favour of or against repression. Indeed, the former was no longer an available option for them. This tremendous shrinking of the 'limits of the possible' was the product of the extraordinary social and political forces activated by the uprising itself. Unsurprisingly, therefore, a considerable part of this thesis has been dedicated to the study of the nature and composition of those forces that expressed themselves – both in Tunisia and Egypt – through the establishment of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition. Therefore, this study has asked itself: where did these mass-based protest movements come from? How did they develop and grow? Moreover, why were the two North African regimes not able to prevent the challenge from below through a substantial upgrading of the populist pact that had been established in the post-independence period? As shown in the thesis, the sudden downfall without pacts and negotiations of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt started with the shrinking of the historical bloc, and the subsequent inability to attract the lower classes into passive and subordinate positions, or to propose a hegemonic and legitimizing narrative. Before describing the similarities and dissimilarities in the process of the breakdown of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, however, it is worthwhile dedicating a few words to the sober and moderate attention that this thesis has dedicated to the role of social classes.

In the last few decades, mainstream political science has almost completely moved away from analysis of collective action in favour of methodological individualism, which has focused on values, behaviour, and psychology. Mobilizations of social groups have therefore been studied only by isolated and heterodox academic departments, often inspired by old and new interpretations of Karl Marx's thoughts. This has led to tremendous and nefarious consequences. Whilst the bulk of our discipline has completely lost any capacity to understand events in which the whole is not the mere sum of its parts – preferring, for instance, to interview protesters gathered in Tahrir Square rather than examining the astonishing social forces put in motion by the uprising – scholars who have reassessed the relevance of class analysis and exploitation as analytic categories have done so in a deterministic fashion. This latter strand of research, indeed, has not only restricted its attention to the working class – assuming that this is the sole or the most relevant collective actor – but it has also hypothesized that conscious workers would necessarily smash capitalism and build a classless order.

In contrast to these two extremes, this thesis has re-embraced Giovanni Sartori's (1969) appeal to move towards "political sociology". It is true that whilst the Italian scholar's position was a reaction against Seymour Lipset's (1959) 'class thread', this thesis has started rejecting the opposite pole – that is, Margaret Thatcher's view that there is no such thing as society, but just individual men and women. In spite of this, the conclusion has been the same: although conflicts are not only economic and related to class structure, in some specific situations these divisions have emerged as relevant, or even crucial. To be clear: this does not mean that workers, professional groups, and businessmen always behave as coherent and organic bodies. Actually, this is almost never the case. As clearly demonstrated by the Middle East, the relevance of material and economic issues has often been blurred by ethnic origins or religious disputes. However, as those scholars who would try to explain everything through class analysis will find in front of unsurmountable deadlocks, political scientists who refuse to examine the role of collective groups are likely to be unable to grasp reality as soon as great political transformations unfold.

This thesis has not claimed that the role of social classes is pivotal in all regime transformations. It goes without saying that, for instance, in some military coups the mobilization from below has been insufficiently relevant to influence the armed forces' behaviour. The 1974 Portuguese case is paradigmatic in this regard. However, the empirical evidence collected throughout this study indicates that in the breakdown of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes the role of collective actors was paramount, suggesting a plausible generalization beyond these two cases. As long as the fall of an authoritarian regime is the product of pacts and negotiations between soft-liners in the government's ranks and moderate groups in the opposition, the role played by collective actors can vary. It might be almost completely null and void in some circumstances and, on the contrary, much more relevant in others.

However, when an authoritarian regime is directly defeated by a mass-based uprising, it follows suit that the process is always the product of some sort of mobilization from below in which collective actors are key. In these instances, due to the fact that the dominant elite is overcome by the uprising itself, it is largely uninfluential whether it was already split between hard- and soft-liners in the pre-uprising period. On the contrary, what is crucial here is the unfolding of an unmanageable social and political dynamic through which the authoritarian domination is suddenly smashed by the pressure from below. As largely vindicated by the Tunisian and Egyptian cases, this is the product of the extraordinary social forces put in

motion that cannot be analysed as the mere sum of single men and women's actions or feelings.

There is also another important element that a moderate return to class analysis has shown – that is, the decisive role played by the middle class in the breakdown of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. The refusal of mainstream political science to take into consideration collective actors and the restricted focus on workers embraced by the orthodox Marxist tradition has determined the lack of attention towards middle-class sectors. In spite of some differences, in both Tunisia and Egypt it was indeed the emergence of a pro-democracy movement, focused on procedural and institutional issues, as well as the mobilization of middle-class professional groups that created the conditions for the formation of those cross-class and cross-ideological coalitions that eventually determined the defeat of the authoritarian regimes.

From about the 1970s on, alternative models to liberal democracy started losing momentum and many surviving authoritarian regimes were forced to justify themselves as transitional regimes aimed at achieving short-term goals – such as restoring order, combatting terroristic threats, and pursuing economic growth. For some decades, it was evident that not only was the 'spirit of the times' in favour of liberal democracy, but also that this combined with a significant shrinking of non-democratic regimes throughout the world. The underlying logic appears to be quite elementary: the impossibility of authoritarian regimes to justify themselves as superior models meant that they could not rely on any reservoir of legitimacy that might have counterbalanced an economic recession, a failure to restore social order, or a military defeat. Being forced to be goal-oriented, authoritarian regimes linked their fortunes to the fulfilment of the promises that justified their own existence. However, and this is precisely the main contradiction on which Ben Ali and Mubarak's regimes were founded, the achievement of an economic growth not concentrated in a few hands and the maintenance of a social pact between the state and society were particularly difficult tasks for peripheral authoritarian regimes at a time in which global neoliberalism emerged as the only game in town. Indeed, populist measures would have led to capital flight, scared international investors, and sacrificed the IMF's loans. In a few words, the end point of the process would have been bankruptcy of the state, huge social consequences for the country, and probably the fall of the regime. The Tunisian and Egyptian governments were therefore forced to reshape their ruling coalitions, bringing about a significant shrinking of the two historical blocs. These processes had already begun in contradictory ways in the 1970s, when the 'populist coalition'

built in the aftermath of independence started disintegrating on the back of high state deficits and economic openings. However, it was only after the two countries had subscribed to the IMF's structural adjustment plan – in 1986 in Tunisia and in 1991 in Egypt – that the narrowing of the ruling coalition took shape in earnest. The two new historical blocs were characterized by some common features. They were limited in numerical and social terms and relied largely on external, as opposed to internal, legitimacy due to their close collaboration with international capital. Even their internal composition was rather similar. In both Tunisia and Egypt, an implicit alliance between high-ranking bureaucrats, trade and commercial businessmen, and entrepreneurs with export-oriented activities took shape. It is true that the historical bloc had a much more productive flavour in Tunisia, where textile and garment capitalists of the north-eastern coast played an important role, whilst in Egypt pharaonic projects financed by the state but realized by private companies were the symbols of a more rapacious and comprador bourgeoisie. In addition, the economic and political power of the Egyptian military, despite its decreasing political influence, was not matched in any way by the traditionally small and not-involved-in-political-matters Tunisian army. Despite these slight differences, the resemblances between the two historical blocs were significant.

What is even more striking, however, is the similar way in which the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes gradually sidelined those constituencies that had been the backbone of their dominations in the previous decades. In both countries, the concentration of power in restricted cliques and the emergence of a strict nexus between the presidency and rapacious tycoons determined the political marginalization of those institutional structures that had been the instruments used by the regime to co-opt moderate opposition forces and to provide upward social mobility to middle-class elements. Opposition forces with some kind of link to social groups were either prevented from participating in parliamentary elections or voluntarily decided to boycott them. In Tunisia, the whole trajectory was much smoother than in Egypt. Indeed, not only did Marxist and Islamist forces never obtain legal recognition under Ben Ali, but also the formation in the liberal field of two relevant political forces – Marzouki's CPR and Chebbi's PDP – that were not willing to play the regime's game meant that the Tunisian Parliament was an empty shell throughout the 2000s. In Egypt, on the other hand, the ebb and flow of political openings determined a contradictory process that in the second half of the 2000s was resolved by the regime in the direction of a forceful expulsion of all opposition forces from the parliament. The most well-known crackdown was against the Muslim Brotherhood, which lost all but one of its 88 seats in 2010. In the Egyptian case,

therefore, it was the increasing authoritarian posture assumed by Mubarak's domination that determined the uselessness of the Parliament as an instrument to co-opt political forces. Despite the different ways in which the processes unfolded in the two countries, the end point was identical. Moreover, the two ruling parties lost their function of a transmission belt between the state and society, as well as their capacity to give a partial representation to some specific groups. The NDP in Egypt and the RCD in Tunisia became full of technocrats and – especially the former – of businessmen, being transformed into parties of puppets completely subjugated to the President's will. Consequently, those politicians who maintained some links to specific constituencies – such as urban intellectuals, professional groups, and small businessmen – were sidelined and replaced with docile 'yes men', who lacked political experience and social weight.

To some extent, the downgrading of the two ruling parties to a marginal political role was also an effect of the increasing sultanistic character of the two regimes in the last few years, fuelling the concentration of power into even more restricted and less accountable cliques. The process was more pronounced in Tunisia. Not only, in fact, did a full third of the country's economy come under the control of the presidential family, but also a strong cult of personality was nurtured by Ben Ali, as clearly demonstrated by the omnipresence of number 7 – the day on which he took power. This is not to say that Mubarak's family did not accumulate an astonishing amount of wealth, concentrating in their hands financial assets, touristic resorts, and enterprises. Yet, the economic power of the president's family was always limited by the presence of other actors (such as the military and multinational firms), whereas Mubarak always behaved in a much more sober way, never promoting his personality as Ben Ali did. The best-known element of the Egyptian regime, something that was lacking in Tunisia, was Mubarak's attempt to transform the republican regime into a hereditary system, cultivating his son Gamal to succeed him. Promoting himself, Gamal Mubarak established a few new political bodies – first and foremost, the Policies Committee – that rapidly became the organs in which decisions were taken and conflicts resolved, weakening the role of the ruling NDP Party.

Another important constituency that was sidelined in Tunisia and Egypt throughout the 2000s was the middle class. This process was the product of three main elements: *a)* the social and political marginalization of all those sectors that did not have direct access to the presidential entourage; *b)* the increasing authoritarian character of the two regimes, something that penalized key middle-class professional groups in their working activities – for instance,

journalists and intellectuals experienced greater scrutiny of their publications, whereas judges and lawyers were asked to support the regime's repressive action against political militants and workers' activists; and c) the gradual vanishing of the threat of an Islamist takeover in the 2000s, a risk that in the preceding decades had fostered a secularist/Islamist divide, preventing the emergence of a cross-ideological alliance and leading several secularist thinkers to support the authoritarian regime as the lesser of the two evils.

On the eve of the uprisings, Tunisia and Egypt were therefore led by historical blocs that were limited in numerical and social terms, that lacked any powerful legitimizing hegemony, and that gradually alienated their 'natural' constituencies. At the same time, powerful protest movements took shape in both countries. In such a development, a glimpse of the dialectic relationship that exists between the narrowing of the regime bases of support and the emergence of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition can be seen. It goes without saying that as long as the historical bloc is able to maintain the loyalty of large and key sectors in society, the unfolding of a protest movement is prevented. Yet, this does not mean that the shrinking of the historical bloc necessarily leads to the establishment of an opposition coalition. It is the partial and often embryonic formation of opposition organizations – sometimes just networks of resistance – that enables the politicization of groups that are partially alienated by the regime, but that without finding a channel through which to express their dissent would remain silent. As soon as this dynamic is activated – that is, the contemporary narrowing of the regime bases of support and the emergence of a protest movement – cause and effect continually change place, and two seemingly separate processes tend to strengthen one another.

In the last stages of the successful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt (nearly) all social classes and political tendencies were mobilized throughout the country. However, the implicit establishment of these cross-class and cross-ideological coalitions followed two distinct paths. In Egypt, the emergence of a pro-democracy movement was mainly the product of a few mass-based mobilizations on international issues – that is, the second Palestinian Intifada and the Iraqi War in 2003 – that led thousands of Egyptians into the streets. The sudden reappearance of the masses after decades of apathy determined a profound renewal of the opposition structures, leading to the establishment of *Kefaya* and its sister organizations in the following years. In these newly formed structures a daily cooperation between political traditions at odds for decades took place, presenting the basis for the establishment of a cross-ideological coalition. After an initial phase characterized by the prominent role played by the masses, however, the pro-democracy movement turned into a narrow network of urban

middle classes – such as professional members, intellectuals, and students – with no real support beyond them, focused on institutional and procedural issues that were inspired by the Western constitutional tradition. In Tunisia, the impetus from below was even more limited and the pro-democracy movement was mainly the product of ‘old’ political groups that tried to mobilize jointly against the regime. It is true that on the back of the World Summit on the Information Society in late 2005 the *18 October Coalition* was formed. However, this was not – as happened in Egypt – the effect of the politicization of new groups or actors, but mainly the coming together of political militants who had already animated the Tunisian political scene for years, if not decades. In the *Collectif* a real and long-lasting collaboration between the three main political traditions that challenged Ben Ali’s regime – that is, Islamism, liberalism, and Marxism – took root. Nevertheless, the gap between urban and middle-class political activists, on the one hand, and the rest of society, on the other, was even more pronounced here than in Egypt, where street activism was reduced to just a few hundred people in the second half of the 2000s, but maintained a vital character never reached in Ben Ali’s Tunisia. The relative weakness of the pro-democracy movement in Tunisia was compensated for by the protests and mobilizations of professional groups throughout the 2000s. Although judges and journalists staged sit-ins and organized acts of civil disobedience, it was lawyers who became the most vocal anti-regime profession, challenging Ben Ali’s authoritarianism and turning out to be one of the main strongholds of the opposition. It is true that in Egypt too several professional groups clashed with the regime in the last years of Mubarak’s domination, yet the degree of politicization of Tunisian lawyers was simply incomparable to any other experience. It is also interesting to emphasize that in Tunisia the emergence of a spirit of reciprocal trust between different political traditions was not only the product of the unfolding of the pro-democracy movement. It was indeed within the lawyers’ ranks that some of the most advanced collaborations between Islamist and secularist forces were proposed and realized.

In the late 2000s, the different genesis and development of the pro-democracy movement in the two countries, as well as the diverse level of mobilization in the professional groups, provided dissimilar organizational support for the protest movement. In Egypt, the long wave of mobilization around procedural issues and the consequent establishment of several groups and networks was a valuable pillar to the blossoming of the uprising. In Tunisia, on the other hand, the 18 October Coalition was not strong enough to call for and support protests, and was replaced in this role by the lawyers’ agency, which emerged as crucial.

Significant differences between the Tunisian and Egyptian protest movements can also be found in the ‘economic’ mobilizations of the lower classes throughout the 2000s. The extraordinarily long and strong wave of workers’ protests that took place in Egypt against neoliberal policies and their consequences was largely the product of those textile workers who were concentrated in gigantic state-owned enterprises and mobilized through the creation of ad hoc strike committees. In Tunisia, although industrial workers became more active in the late 2000s, the labour movement was led instead by white-collar workers who were rank-and-file members in left-leaning and radical UGTT sections. The different character of the sole legal and recognized trade union federation in the two countries meant that whilst Egyptian workers could not even use the lowest levels of the ETUF structures – that is, workplace union committees – to mobilize any of the resources of the federation in their favour, the Tunisian working class could rely on the organizational structure of one of the main forces of the country. The dissimilar nature of the ‘economic’ protest movement emerged clearly in the two events that played a transformative role in the outbreak of the uprisings – the great strike in Mahalla al-Kubra in December 2006 and the six-month-long popular revolt in the Gafsa basin in January 2008. The former was a ‘classic’ industrial strike, which reverberated throughout the whole Egyptian textile sector in the following months. The latter, in contrast, was an unprecedented mobilization of one of the most disadvantaged Tunisian regions in which the architecture of the 2010–2011 uprising coalition emerged for the first time. The Gafsa revolt was animated by young unemployed, white-collar workers who were members in the local UGTT sections, and lawyers. In this development, the two wings of the protest movement – that is, ‘political’ mobilizations and ‘economic’ protests – came together after they had developed on apparently parallel tracks for years. It is interesting to point out that the reciprocal fertilization between the pro-democracy movement and workers’ mobilizations led to a convergence in Egypt too where urban middle-class groups and newborn strike committees tried to organize the first national strike in the textile sector since Nasser’s coup. The attempt to bring together Cairo-based liberal-oriented political groups and the most politicized part of the labour movement was a fiasco. On April 6, 2008, Egyptian textile workers did not strike. However, the organizational support provided by the pro-democracy movement allowed disgruntled young people to express their frustration. It might sound contradictory, but it was in the city that symbolized textile workers in Egypt – that is, Mahalla al-Kubra – that an uncommon alliance between middle-class political networks and urban ‘lumpenproletariat’ took form. It was to be the engine of the 2011 uprising.

Although the downfalls of the Tunisian and Egyptian authoritarian regimes share several similarities, the way in which the uprisings broke out and developed were rather dissimilar. In Tunisia, the upheaval was initially characterized by a cross-class alliance between marginalized youth – either employed in the growing informal sector or not employed at all – politically radical white-collar workers, and middle-class lawyers. It was Mohammed Bouazizi's tragic death that triggered protests, which remained limited to Sidi Bouzid's governorate for about one week, before spreading to neighbouring regions. This development was only possible due to the organizational support provided by the lawyers' network and even more by the UGTT radical sections and federations – in particular, postal workers, and primary and secondary education. In Egypt, on the other hand, it was an implicit alliance between middle-class elements and professional groups, on the one hand, and the urban 'lumpenproletariat', on the other, that led to the outbreak of unprecedented protests. Although the sudden and spectacular irruption of the masses into the political arena was neither planned nor expected, protests were meticulously prepared by traditional parties, their youth wings, and more recently formed political networks. Without the organizational framework established by political structures that were all middle class in nature and liberal in flavour, it is likely that the Egyptian uprising would not have been unleashed. In sharp contrast to the Tunisian upheaval, the uprising in Egypt immediately took on a national character, spreading throughout the main urban centres of the country. Despite these significant differences, both uprisings were scarcely able to lure other social sectors in their first two weeks, and they started to resemble each other much more once the Tunisian upheaval, through its molecular development, had reached the outskirts of Tunis. As soon as it happened, Ben Ali and Mubarak's regime were challenged by a nationwide and radical protest movement. Having said that, had the two uprisings failed to attract other key social sectors, they would arguably have been smashed by the regime's reaction. The main missing element was industrial workers in both countries. Although shipyard workers went on strike in Suez in the early days of the uprising, the complete co-optation of the ETUF and the government's decision to close down state-owned enterprises to avoid the spread of revolutionary fervour to productive activities posed serious limitations on workers' mobilization in Egypt. In Tunisia, the passive role of industrial workers in the initial phases of the uprising is instead more debatable and should probably be linked to a more limited process of radicalization of workers in the pre-uprising period and to their relatively better living conditions. Nevertheless, it was the late entry of the organized labour movement that tilted the balance of power between the regime

and protesters in favour of the latter in both countries. In Tunisia, the process was unleashed by the contradictory character of the UGTT, which tried to balance the attempt of its leadership to remain faithful to Ben Ali and the contemporary need to maintain some kind of relationship with a radical and militant base, which asked for a national general strike. The solution chosen by the UGTT's bureau was to grant to its local and regional sections the right to organize peaceful protests and strikes. However, this rapidly became an unexpected and tremendous springboard for the unfolding of the uprising, which assumed for the first time a truly cross-class and cross-ideological character during the strike in Sfax on January 12. Not only, in fact, did industrial workers take part in the protests as a collective body and not as mere individuals, but also middle-class sectors other than lawyers and marginalized businessmen joined in. The new coming together of this coalition in Tunis two days later signified the end point of Ben Ali's regime. In Egypt, on the other hand, it was the reopening of state-owned enterprises after nearly two weeks that gave workers the opportunity to act collectively. The wave of strikes that crippled the whole country, and also reached the military's economic empire, was astonishing and developed through old and new committees established by workers themselves. It was therefore the irruption of the labour movement into the uprising in both countries that determined the formation of a much broader opposition coalition and that propelled a systemic crisis that required an urgent solution –either the military's ferocious repression or the fall of the regime. The unwillingness of the armed forces to fire on protesters meant that the latter was the only available option. Two supposedly unbeatable regimes thus collapsed after a few weeks of unprecedented protests. These astonishing successes were the product of two different – in their genesis and internal composition – cross-class and cross-ideological coalitions.

The explanation provided for the downfall of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt has also been tested in a 'negative' case – that is, against the authoritarian stability in Algeria. From independence to the 1988 events, the three North African countries had a remarkably similar economic dynamic, initially characterized by state-led industrialization and successively by the attempt to open the economic sphere. Although oil and gas rents were almost immediately available in Algeria to a significant extent, the attempt to industrialize the country prevented the development of a 'classic' rentier economy. In the late 1980s, for instance, manufacturing activities represented 15 per cent of the value added to GDP in Algeria – that is, similar to Egypt (16 per cent) and Tunisia (17 per cent). However, the October riots in 1988, the following democratic experiment, and the onset of a cruel and long-

lasting civil war led to Algeria undertaking a unique and rather dissimilar path in comparison to Egypt and Tunisia. This was mainly characterized by two aspects. First and foremost, the uncommon combination of the government's complete withdrawal from direct investments in the economy and the absence of privatization of state-owned enterprises brought about an accelerated process of deindustrialization. As expected, this dynamic went hand in hand with the numerical and strategical marginalization of blue-collar workers. In turn, this element, together with the presence of an aristocracy of labour – that is, a partially favoured stratum of workers – in the hydrocarbon sector, where a tiny minority of the Algerian labour force produces an astonishing amount of wealth, contributes to explaining why the Algerian labour movement was particularly weak throughout the 2000s.

Secondly, the direct and indirect effects of the civil war determined a political environment in which opposition forces distrusted one another as much as they distrusted the regime, thereby preventing the possibility of establishing a 'negative coalition'. The prolonged confrontation between the military and the Islamists in the 1990s forced all political and social groups to support one of the two factions in the zero-sum game that took place, producing reciprocal resentments in the opposition ranks that were far from resolved in 2011. Moreover, the direct effects of the civil war were exacerbated by its indirect consequences. In the mid-1990s, in pursuing an attempt to rebuild a (partial) legitimacy, the Algerian regime chose to return to the electoral process. It goes without saying that this was not an attempt to restart the democratization abruptly interrupted by the military coup just a few years before. The main reason for that lies, on the contrary, in the endeavour to mask the reality of authoritarian rule behind the formal existence of democratic institutions. The benefits for the Algerian ruling elite of the establishment of an illiberal multi-party system were several and relevant. Some opposition forces obtained ministerial positions, becoming co-opted and thus scarcely reliable for many ordinary citizens. In addition, the mere existence of partially free elections in which parliamentary seats, media visibility, and financial funds could have been gained by opposition forces spread recurrent and never solved discussion about whether tactically playing the regime game was profitable or not. Taking part in fraudulent elections and assuming positions in the government became therefore two further lines of divisions in the opposition ranks.

In conclusion, it can be stated that deindustrialization and rentierism, on the one hand, and the peculiar Algerian political environment, on the other, were the main elements that prevented the development of a broad protest movement against Bouteflika's regime. However, the non-formation of a cross-class and cross-ideological coalition has also to be seen as the product of

the Algerian regime's capacity to retain the loyalty of some key constituencies – that is, the ruling FLN party, middle-class professionals, and state employees. Although the historical bloc in Algeria was largely formed by a tiny alliance in numerical and social terms between the military and a parasitic private sector, hydrocarbon rents and the threat of an Islamist takeover were important factors in luring some key social groups onto the regime's side. It was therefore the robustness of the ruling coalition that presented an initial and insurmountable hindrance to the development of a powerful opposition movement in Algeria. As stated at length throughout the thesis, as long as the regime is able to foster a sufficiently large coalition, a mass-based uprising cannot take place.

The authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt have not been the only ones defeated by mass-based uprisings in the modern world. There are certainly other examples of broad opposition movements that have determined the sudden downfall of authoritarian regimes without pacts and negotiations. However, it is likely that due to the numerical limitedness of such events and their temporal and geographical dispersion, scholars might have analysed these either as 'classic' falls of authoritarian regimes or 'aborted' revolutions. The events that occurred in Sudan in 1985, Haiti in 1986, and Romania in 1989 share certain broad similarities with the successful Tunisian and Egyptian mass-based uprisings. They all took place in authoritarian regimes that *a)* were peripheral countries; *b)* showed some degree of sultanism; *c)* relied heavily on the security forces to maintain order; and *d)* had already alienated key constituencies in previous years. Moreover, not only was no organized revolutionary movement able to seize power in the aftermath of the fall of the authoritarian regimes, but also – with the partial exception of Haiti, where the uprising went on for a couple of months before forcing Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier to flee the country – the processes were tremendously rapid⁸². The uprising lasted just 11 days in Romania, 12 in Sudan, 18 in Egypt, and 29 in Tunisia. In the final stages of these processes the role of the armed forces was instrumentally decisive, as they refused to fire on protesters and force out from power long-lasting autocrats. Although in the Sudanese events the military played a more active role, in all episodes the armed forces reacted to an unprecedented protest movement fostered by the establishment of a broad opposition coalition in which nearly all social classes and political tendencies participated.

⁸² To a large extent, the 1917 February 'revolution' in Russia also has several similarities with the breakdown of the authoritarian regimes in Sudan, Haiti, Romania, Egypt, and Tunisia. Yet, Russia was not a peripheral country and the unfolding of the events led Bolsheviks to take over power, unleashing significant political, economic, social, and ideological transformations.

Having said that, it remains debatable whether the arguments developed in this thesis with specific reference to the Egyptian and Tunisian cases might be generalized to some of the aforementioned successful uprisings or even to other episodes. In a sense, the answer is unequivocally ‘no’. The mass-based revolts in Tunisia and Egypt were the product of historical circumstances and social structures profoundly dissimilar to those of the other countries. Despite the patrimonial character of Ceaușescu’s regime, Romania was part of the Eastern Bloc, maintaining a no-market economy and limiting the role of private enterprises. The important part played by marginalized businessmen in the last days of the Tunisian uprising has no similarity with the Romanian events. In Haiti and Sudan, on the other hand, not only were agricultural activities much more crucial, but also their economic and political weakness made the two states strongly affected by shifts in the international economic policies and by flows of foreign investments. It was the contradictory need of Gaafar Nimeiry’s regime to maintain the support for Ronald Reagan’s administration and the unbearable social costs of such an alliance – due to the IMF’s programme strongly sponsored by the US – that triggered the Sudanese uprising. In a similar vein, the astonishing dependence of the Haitian economy on foreign aid – first and foremost from the US – made Duvalier’s regime much less independent than those of Mubarak and Ben Ali.

Limits are thus placed on the generalizability of the causal pattern identified by this thesis in Tunisia and Egypt. Yet, as is often the case in comparative historical studies focused on geographically and historically bounded cases, the development of specific accounts might lead to ‘testing’ these in new contexts, leading either to fully confirming the explanation or – more likely – to identifying some variables as contingent, therefore asking scholars to refine their statements. As already shown, the attempt to generalize some insights beyond the Tunisian and Egyptian events might be feasible in analysing the mass-based uprisings that led to the downfall of the authoritarian regimes in Sudan, Haiti, and Romania⁸³. Arguably, scholars who decide to work in such a direction will end up with more general, but less specific, statements, highlighting the core elements for the success of successful uprisings against authoritarian regimes in which pacts and negotiations play no role. It seems that there is abundant room for further progress in the study of the way in which autocracies survive and

⁸³ Another interesting comparison might be drawn between these cases and the Hungarian uprising in 1956. Similarly, the development of ‘Solidarność’, although it did not lead to the breakdown of the authoritarian regime in Poland, presents several common elements.

fall. After all, as stated in the Introduction, the main scope of this thesis was precisely to strengthen the already increasing academic interest in non-democratic regimes.

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