Comparing the Transition of Political Regime in Libya and Egypt

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Abstract

Although the third wave of democratization overturned autocracies around the world, Libyan and Egyptian regimes stayed afloat for a long period. Libya and Egypt were ruled by dictatorial regimes for decades, but there were varying degrees of tyranny in both countries. One means of comparing political transition in Libya and Egypt is to examine both regimes’ structures. Qaddafi’s regime was a personalistic regime that lacked the genuine institutions that could rein in Qaddafi's singularity by power and by ruling the country.

In contrast Mubarak regime was seen as a hybrid regime in that it apparently combined democratic and authoritarian institutions, but in reality, it was a dictatorship regime. Mubarak regime used democratic institutions as a facade to hide the real nature of the regime. The political system is dominated by the president, who has strong legislative powers and can dissolve parliament.

Keywords: political transition, military institution, civil war
Introduction

Although political transition is a natural phenomenon that continuously occurs in different regions of the world, it was not expected to occur in the Arab world. The Arab world has been deprived of democracy for decades; there was no sign of change. Most Arab leaders prepared their sons to assume the power, but the events of 2011 developed rapidly in Tunis, Egypt, and Libya, which foiled their plans and surprised domestic and foreign observers alike. The Arab world has faced various revolutions named the Arab Spring as an attempt to come out from dark decades of suffering under authoritarian regimes. Since their independence from Western countries, Arab peoples are deprived from exercising their rights, expressing their opinion, and choosing their governments by fair and free election.

The contagion of Arabic Spring spread like wildfire to other Arab countries: some succeeded in changing their regimes, and others are still struggling for change. The military was the main actor in the political transition in Tunis, Egypt and Libya, whether through forcing their presidents to leave power as in Tunis and Egypt, or dividing into two parts as in Libya, which entered the country into civil war ended by the death of Qaddafi. The key question to ask in this regard is: Why was the political transition in Egypt more peaceful than its neighbor, Libya?

This paper argues that the institutionalization of the military makes a political transition more peaceful than a country that has a low level of military institutionalization, (i.e. Egypt and Libya). The institutionalization of military institution means that the appointment of officers and high ranks in the military institution are done on the basis of efficiency and meritocratic, not on the loyalty and kinship as on the Libyan case under Gaddafi's rule. So, the lack of a strong military institution is the main factor that made the transition in Libya more violent than Egypt. Whenever the military units are fragmented and lack connections with each other, the country is more likely face a wave of violence in the case of transitioning its regime.

The main purpose of this paper is to analyze the political transition in Libya and Egypt, to achieve this goal, this paper organized as follows. Section I focus on the transition of political regime in Libya through three points: A analyzes the Libyan military institution. B presents the reasons that led to uprising in Libya. C discusses the role of the military in Libyan revolution. Section II presents the transition of political regime in Egypt via three points: A focuses on the Egyptian military institution. B explains the reasons that led to the uprising in Egypt 2011. C reveals the role of the military in Egyptian revolution.

The Transition of Political Regime in Libya

The recent political transition in Libya in 2011 constituted an important turning point on the domestic and international levels. Libya, for forty two
years, suffered under a dictatorship, which impeded political and economic development and wasted Libyan money on false personal ambitions. Libya was one of the most desperate countries in the region needing the most change in its regime because of the brutality of the regime. Indeed, Qaddafi’s policies created contention in the Libyan street, but Qaddafi was intolerant of the people’s will. He faced that by fire and iron. Qaddafi’s policies violated human rights, obstructed Libyan society, and led to serious accumulations of grievances that created a ground for his opposition’s activities. Qaddafi was never listening to anyone in Libya; he was only listening to his reason. Qaddafi kept many of the same faces in their positions and designed semi-institutions that enabled him to control the country for more than four decades. When the opportunity arose, many Libyans did not hesitate to protest and fight against the regime. The nature of Qaddafi’s regime made the Libyan revolution bloodier. Qaddafi, through his rule, ensured that there was no institution that could challenge him including the army. He intentionally kept the army weak and divided. Unlike in Egypt and Tunisia, the Libyan army was corrupted. It was not allowed to act as a neutral power between the demonstrators and the regime or to force Qaddafi to step down. Qaddafi’s Special Forces were stronger than the regular army, and was controlled by Qaddafi’s tribe and additional allied tribes.

*The Libyan Military Institution*

Since its independence in 1951, Libya had two separate institutions that monopolized the use of force. The classic army’s task was defending the country and Special Forces’ function was to protect the regime. During the rule of King Idris 1951-1969, the Special Forces consisted of the Cyrenaica Defense Forces (CYDEF) that were essentially recruited from loyal Sanusi supporters and the Tripolitanian Defense Forces (TRIDEF). They were not only considered the main military organization, but also they were entrusted by the regime with controlling any potential Nasserist activities in the military institution.  

1 By the coup of 1969, the Revolution Armed Forces was entrusted to secure the regime and defend the country during the transition period. The Libyan Armed Forces were successors of the Libyan Army of the Sanusi monarchy, and its staff numbers and equipment rapidly increased since 1969. The Libyan Army went up from 7,000 members in 1969 to 20,000 in 1973, 55,000 in 1982, and 86,000 members in 2004. The estimated expenditure on the military estimated between the 1973 and 1983 was roughly $28 billion; about $20 billion went to the Soviet Union and the rest went to the Eastern bloc countries for purchasing weapons for Libya.  

2 Although the head of the Libyan regime, Qaddafi, came from the military institution through the coup in 1969, the Libyan army cannot be considered the

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2Ibid., pp. 2- 3.
dominant force in the country or to control the joints of the country. It was forced to share in the operation of domestic politics with other players, whether official or unofficial. The heart of the regime was the Revolutionary Committees, the General People’s Congress, the intelligence apparatus, the Free Officers’ Unionist Movement, and the People’s Committee for Social Affairs.  

Authoritarian regimes differ with each other; they adopt different ways of appointing staff to government offices and get support from different segments of society. They trace different paths for making decisions, with different forms of intra-elite factionalism and rivalry, different means of choosing leaders and bequeathing power, and different reactions to society and opposition. These differences cause dictatorial regimes to collapse in different ways, and they also affect post-transition outcomes.  

Since the coup of 1969, Muammar Qaddafi had ruled Libya, but he had not tied Libya’s military to his own position as effectively as his peers in Syria and Iraq did. Qaddafi had faced threats from the military elite. The regime was shaken by army rebellion as well as sporadic attacks by the Militant Islamic Group. After an unsuccessful coup attempt of 1975, Qaddafi became substantially dependent upon his close family members for maintaining security. He appointed his relatives in the top military and security positions. Like Saddam Hussein, Qaddafi established a parallel military named the Armed People to monitor the professional armed forces.  

Qaddafi distrusted the armed forces after unsuccessful coup attempts. The military under Qaddafi became corrupt and ineffective, performing miserably in Uganda in the 1970s and in Chad during the 1980s. Qaddafi deeply politicized his armed forces to keep them under control and to keep them weak.  

Libya had a set of security agencies along with a regular army that aimed to protect Qaddafi’s regime. They consisted of Revolutionary Committees, the Revolutionary Guards, and the People’s Guards, all led by Qaddafi’s relatives or members of his own or particularly loyal tribes. Multiple forces not only dishearten coup attempts against the ruling regime, but also allows resistance to the regular army when coup attempts do occur. Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary

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Guard Corp, Iraq’s Popular Militia, and Libya’s Revolutionary Committees exemplify this strategy.  

Uprising in Libya

The uprising in Libya resulted from the frustration that hit Libyans from decades of the government promising political and economic reforms. Events in both Tunisia and Egypt facilitated the moving of the contagion of revolution to Libya. The uprising against Qaddafi began in Benghazi on February 15, 2011, before two days that were planned to celebrate the fifth anniversary of a demonstration in Benghazi that was against the infamous Danish cartoons of the prophet Mohammed, but quickly turned against the regime. The protest started two days earlier than planned because of the arrest of Fathi Turbil, the lawyer who represented victims’ families of the 1996 Abu Salim prison massacre as named. 

At the beginning of the revolution, Qaddafi’s regime sought to guarantee the regular military’s compliance through giving cash and making threats, by purging commanders who hesitated to open fire against the rebels, and holding the families of units’ commanders as hostages. Qaddafi put others whom he distrusted under house arrest in the early days of the revolution. During the first week, Qaddafi’s forces killed more than 200 people in Benghazi. According to the UN within a month, a thousand more had been killed in widespread conflicts. By late March, Qaddafi’s forces recaptured control over Tripoli, Zawya and Zuwara through the use of excessive force, while continuing besiege revolutionaries in Misurata and Jebel Nafusa in the northwest.

“[I]n mid March U.S., British, and French forces, under UN Security Council Resolution 1973, began implementing a no-fly zone and striking Qaddhafi’s fighters, stopping them just outside Benghazi…NATO took over command of the no-fly zone a week after the initial airstrikes”. UN Security Council Resolution 1973 authorized the international alliance to protect civilians and enforce a no-fly zone that aimed to paralyze Qaddafí’s forces from retaking the northeast of the country.

In the same direction, after the uprising started, the NTC formed in Benghazi as the political body that led anti-Qaddafi forces. The NTC consisted of an executive board and members who represented city councils throughout the county. Eight countries and regional and international organizations, 

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2AL-Turk, 2011, p. 120.
4AL-Turk, 2011, p. 120.
6AL-Turk, 2011, p. 121.
7Lacher, 2011, p. 2.
including the Arab League and the United Nations, recognized the NTC as the only legitimate representative for Libyans.  

The Role of the Libyan Military in the Revolution

The role of Arab militaries was considered mainly to be protecting the Arab regimes before the popular uprising in 2011. Once the revolt broke out against the authoritarian regimes, the military in those countries either played the role of midwife to transition or remained loyal and shared in repression and promoting the survival of current regimes. Military forces had been a main actor in the Arab spring; their response differed from one country to another. In Tunisia and Egypt, the military stood up with the revolution and forced both Ben Ali and Mubarak to leave the power, while in Libya, the military divided into two parts; one supported Qaddafi, another fought against him until his regime collapsed. Lutterbeck argues that the difference in response of the military in the Arab spring is attributed to the different forms of civil-military relations and different characteristics of the military apparatus. He especially focuses on, the degree of institutionalization of the armed forces and their relationship to society in general as an explanation the diverse responses to prodemocracy movements.

During the revolution, Qaddafi’s regime was divided between supporters and opponents due to the low levels of institutional development—especially in the military, wide spread of corruption, and the lack of independent of public institutions. Libya had no constitution since the coup of 1969. It had no formal head of the state; Qaddafi presented himself as the supreme guide or the leader of a large clan. There was no genuine parliament. For decades, Qaddafi had weakened Libyan governmental institutions including the military institution in order to enhance his leverage on the country.

Qaddafi’s regime was unlike the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes that fell quickly. Qaddafi refused to step down. He gathered his main supporters and launched a brutal campaign as an attempt to put down the revolution.

Although the Libyan revolution was similar to the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions in that they all overthrew their leaders, Tunis and Egypt only produced several of hundreds of dead, while Libyan society paid a high cost of human lives. It was estimated almost 30,000 people were killed and 50,000 wounded during a six-month civil war.

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1AL-Turk, 2011, p. 118.
3Lutterbeck, 2012, p.28.
4Barany, 2011, p. 29.
5AL-Turk, 2011, p. 117
The Transition of the Political Regime in Egypt

The Egyptian regime continuously faced public pressure for economic and political reforms. Egyptians escalated their demands when Mubarak sought to pass down the power to his son Gamal. Therefore, the Egyptian people were ready for change and the Tunisian revolution stimulated Egyptians to overthrow Mubarak’s regime and move forward in building a democratic state. The Egyptian change occurred by the will of Egyptian people and with the support from the military. The transition has been led by elements of the old regime. The military institution played a central role in supporting the revolution and forcing Mubarak, who ruled the country for three decades, to leave power. It helped to secure the country and prepare for the transition period to civilian authority in the state's affairs.

The Egyptian Military Institution

Since the revolution of 1952, the Egyptian military has played a main role in domestic political life. The three previous presidents—Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak—came from the military institution. Military officials, active or retired, had occupied essential positions in the governmental apparatus. The key role of the Egyptian military centered on guaranteeing national security against external enemies and supporting any regime that has been in power. Other important roles were serving as a symbol of national unity, a socializing force, and economic engine. The Egyptian armed forces divided into four major components—the Ground Forces, Air Force, Air Defense Force, and Navy, with a total of almost 470,000 active personnel and a reserve force of equal size. “The Egyptian military does not have a direct say in decisions about who is allowed or not allowed to run in elections (unlike, for example, the military in Turkey), but its role in Egyptian politics and society can hardly be overstated”. The political system in Egypt was controlled by the military; it used its political power indirectly through the political and bureaucratic elites. The military not only controlled politics but the politicians as well. The role of the military oscillated in political life according to the nature of the leadership and the extent to which the regime that was allowed to interfere in political matters was affected by their presence.

6Bolme et al., 2012, p. 7
politics and decision making. The military was a prominent state institution and made political decisions between 1952 and 1970.\(^1\) Nasser relied on the military to put down any civilian opposition group’s activities, but at the same time he was strict and intolerant with military leaders who held more power than Nasser. For instance, the collapse of Amer, the former Minister of Defense, increased Nasser’s power and constituted an important turning point from a military engaged heavily in politics to a more professional military. Nasser completed this transition when he purged the military leadership following the 1967 war and removed all military leaders of the 1952 revolution who had a popular base in Egyptian society.\(^2\)

During the mid 1970s, the military had been declining in its direct involvement in political matters of the state, but on the other side, it expanded its role in Egyptian life and economy.\(^3\) Under the rule of Sadat, the military respected the wishes of its political leadership and withdrew from participating in politics within a framework of the multi-party system that was adopted in the mid 1970s.\(^4\) The nonparticipation of the military in politics since the early 1980s made the military completely subjected to the civilian authority of President Mubarak.\(^5\) Mubarak’s government included active and retired military officials in the core positions of the state—vice president, defense minister, prime minister, and deputy prime minister. Mubarak himself was former commander of the air force.\(^6\)

In fact, the political and socioeconomic role of the military is harder to assess in Egypt than in any other Middle Eastern country. Prior the revolution, this subject is taboo. Despite attempts to question the military’s size or budget, its affairs are never subject to debate or censure.\(^7\) Amr Hamzawy mentions (as cited in Kurtzer and Svenstrup, 2012, p. 44), that the military’s economic activity pegged up to 30 percent of the total of Egyptian economy, or almost $60 billion. Therefore, the military has sought different ways to keep its business holding and keep its activities out of the national budget based on the Law 32.\(^8\) Although cronyism and favoritism were widespread among the Egyptian army forces, the Egyptian military forces were described as a professional and largely meritocratic force.\(^9\)

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\(^4\)Harb, 2003, p. 270.

\(^5\)Ibid, p. 270

\(^6\)White, 2011, p. 2


\(^8\)Kurtzer and Svenstrup, 2012, p. 45.

\(^9\)Lutterbeck, 2012, pp. 36.
The Uprising in Egypt 2011

The uprising of 2011 in Egypt against Mubarak’s regime was a result of the continuation of authoritarian rule and the increase of economic inequalities. The uprising represented all sectors of the Egyptian society—leftists, feminists, Islamists, Arab nationalists. The protesters were a mixed team from all social classes and all educational backgrounds. The most major figures in the revolt were young, educated, and Internet-savvy, usually liberal or leftist in orientation. Also, Islamists groups played important role in the Tahrir Square protests. The Muslim Brotherhood was the most powerful opposition movement during the uprising.

Indeed, young Egyptians, inspired by the events in Tunisia, used technology including Facebook and Twitter to mobilize themselves and to protest against the regime’s policies that had violated human rights and enhanced corruption and economic inequalities for decades. Although Hosni Mubarak was considered one of the strongest dictatorships in the region, ruling Egypt for 30 years, he was forced to leave power under public pressure on February 11, 2011, after only 18 days, when almost 15 million protesters took the street in cities from Cairo to Alexandria, from Ismailia to Suez. The protesters represented different spectrums of the Egyptian society—ideologically, socially, economically, and educationally. Since the 2000s the opposition succeeded in organizing themselves with their ability to use technology. The uprising in Egypt did not start when the Tunisian revolution broke out. Globalization that influenced the world, especially in the post-Cold War era, influenced and strengthened Egyptian social movements. While they avoided direct criticism of the regime, they express themselves through regional issues such as their criticisms to the Iraq War in 2003.

The Egyptian military under Mubarak differed from Libya’s military under Qaddafi. In the Libyan Revolution, Libyan society divided its loyalty to the Qaddafi regime between supporters and opponents according to tribes’ loyalty to Qaddafi. The loyal tribes reflected also on the unity of the Libyan military, which entered the country into the armed conflict that continued for six months. In Egypt, the opposition parties and political and social movements were organized and united in their demands to put an end to Mubarak regime. The crucial role of the opposition was its success in mobilizing millions of Egyptians to protest against Mubarak’s regime with technology. This illustrated that Egyptian society had a kind of political mobility and a margin of freedom despite the fact that the regime was authoritarian.

In the early days, the Libyan revolution lacked organization and leadership because of the lack of political parties, civil society organizations, and the

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1Kurtzer & Svenstrup, 2012, p. 42.
3Hamid, 2011, p. 103.
4Bolme et al., 2012, p. 18.
5Elagati, 2011, p. 2.
6Bolme et al., 2012, p. 13
military institution. Moreover, the nature of the Qaddafi regime was very brutal; it used heavy weapons against peaceful protesters during the first days of the revolt. Libyans found difficulties in mobilizing themselves by gathering a big number of people at the same time in different regions of Libya due to the regime banning all political activities, but the internet played an alternative role to the political parties and unions to mobilize the masses, which contributed to overthrowing Qaddafi’s regime with the support of the international community.

**The Role of the Egyptian Military in the Revolution**

Once the protests spread on the whole Egyptian soil on January 25, Egyptians looked to the attitude of the Egyptian army. The Egyptian army drew its strength from its dignified and powerful position within the system. It represented the 10th greatest army in the world. The Egyptian army is a respected organization because it assumed a great role in protecting the country from imperialism.¹ The Egyptian military institution led a mostly peaceful political transition through forcing President Mubarak to leave the power. At the beginning, the Egyptian military refused to open fire against the demonstrators and avoided involvement in a bloodbath to protect a President that all indicators pointed out had lost legitimacy. Although the army had been for three decades the main support for Mubarak’s regime, it did not stand against people’s will; the army forced Mubarak to resign after more than three decades in power.² The Egyptian military contributed to stabilizing the country during the revolution; it took over the responsibilities of the internal security forces when they collapsed, secured the governmental institutions, and prevented the country from sliding into chaos.³ The question that spins in the mind of many people is why the Egyptian military institution had decided to stand up with the revolution instead of supporting Mubarak, who was considered a former member of the military institution?

Although Mubarak was a military man and he contributed to improving the military forces during his rule for three decades, the Egyptian military was unlikely to sacrifice its position and role for Mubarak.⁴ The Egyptian military stood up with the revolution because…“the army’s economic empire; the army’s social base, which incorporates roughly about 75 percent of drafted Egyptians; and the army’s special ties with the United States, especially with the Pentagon and the American military-industrial complex.”⁵

The combination of above factors led the army to support the revolution. The army leaders decided to sacrifice President Mubarak after only 17 of the 18 days of the revolution in order to keep their special position in Egyptian

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¹Bolme et al., 2012, p. 21.
²Hamid, 2011, p. 104
The Egyptian army managed approximately twenty big factories. Its exports are estimated at between $200-300 million annually. Since the 1980s, the army had become the only and most significant economic body in the country because of diverse products including: manufacturing of weapons, electronics and consumer goods; infrastructure development; various agribusinesses and services in tourism and commerce. The army had investments in almost all sectors from cosmetics to mineral water. Additionally, the army controlled the Egyptian economy through its members serving in the High Policy Committee where fundamental consumption prices are set. Today the economic power of the Egyptian army is still a mystery. Although the Egyptian government adopted the program of privatization and structural adjustment since the mid-1990s, the military refused to disclose its economic assets.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to explain the recent political transition using Libya and Egypt as a case study. In both countries, the transition happened through different manners according to the nature of the regime. In Libya, the country lacked a constitution since the coup of 1969 and institutions, including the military institution, which enabled Qaddafi to rule the country for more than four decades undisputed. Qaddafi ruled the country by the Revolutionary Committees and through creating balance among tribes as well as via the security brigades that were led by his sons and loyalists to his regime. Qaddafi’s policies led to the accumulation of grievances that pushed Libyans to protest against his regime. The reaction of Qaddafi’s regime differed from Mubarak’s regime; it entered the country into civil war, while the Egyptian revolution was less violent than Libya.

This paper argues that the lower the level of institutionalization of military institution, the more violence the country will face in the case of political transition. This applied in both Libyan and Egyptian cases. Qaddafi’s regime was a personalistic regime that deliberately weakened the military institution since the unsuccessful coup of 1975 to remove any potential threat to his regime. Instead, he established security units to protect his regime. Because Libya lacked a strong military institution that could force Qaddafi to leave power during the revolution of 2011, the Libyan military divided into two parts according to soldiers’ tribal affiliations. Qaddafi was dependent on the tribal factor during the establishment of the military units. Once the revolution broke out, some entire military units joined the rebels, while other units remained

1Ibid, p.399.
2Bolme et al., 2012, p. 22.
loyal to Qaddafi’s regime and fought with him until his death and the collapse of his regime.

In contrast, though Egypt was ruled by three dictators since the coup of 1952, Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak, and all came from the military institution, Egypt has built a strong military institution since then that was not based on tribal or ethnic affiliations, but instead on efficiency and merit bases. The Egyptian military played an oscillating role in the political life under previous regimes. The Egyptian military did not have a direct influence in political decision making as does the military in Turkey; its role was more in the economic sector that controlled a large part of economic activities and created what is known as the economic empire. Indeed, Mubarak ruled Egypt through the National Democratic Party (NDP) that controlled Egyptian Parliament and all joints of the state.

Although at the beginning of the Egyptian revolution, the military stood with President Mubarak for 17 days of the 18 days of the revolution, it refused Mubarak’s orders to open fire against the protesters. When the Egyptian military realized that Mubarak had lost his legitimacy, the military forced Mubarak to leave power in order to protect its interests that are estimated to be up to 30 percent of the total Egyptian economy.

This paper concluded that with high levels of institutionalization in the military institution, the levels of violence that a country will witness during a transition process will be lower. This was clearly illustrated in Libya and Egypt during their revolutions. The relationship between the Egyptian military and people was very strong; the military was hand-in-hand with Egyptians in Tahrir Square, while some of the Libyan military was fighting Libyans from one city to another, due to the low level of institutionalization in the military institution.

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