

The Rise and Decline of the Populist Social Contract in the Arab World

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Scholars of the Middle East have widely argued that, even in the region's mostly non-democratic states, legitimacy (Hudson 1977), ruling bargains (Kamrava 2014) and social contracts or pacts (Waterbury (1997), Heydemann (2007), Meijer (2017) matter for state stability. Not only was the consolidation of post-independence republican regimes in the Arab world widely attributed to a populist authoritarian contract, but also the post-2010 uprisings can arguably be traced to regimes' reneging on this contract.

This article will examine the causes and consequences of the rise and fall of the populist authoritarian social contract in the Arab world. The method is to bring together several bodies of literature that seldom converge, namely critical approaches to globalization and work on the long evolution of Middle East politics over several phases. These are combined, via a neo-Gramscian lens (Cox and Sinclair 1996: 85-123), to construct a radical political economy alternative to the mainstream understanding of the Arab world's current crisis.

Specifically, the paper shows that the rise and decline of populism in the Arab world and resistance to this decline can only be understood in the context of the global political economy. It does so by tracing the links and congruence or incongruence between the global and regional levels. Specifically, it argues that: 1) at the regional level, the idea of a populist social contract is deeply embedded in MENA's¹ centuries old "moral economy"; 2) the global political economy sets the broad context determining the viability of such a contract: it was congruent with global norms in the roughly half century (1930-80) period when global finance capital was in retreat, but incongruent with finance capital's post-1980s resurgence; 3) when norms and practices at the two levels are incongruent, rival social forces struggle over how to bring them into congruence: in the core, international institutions, transnational classes, and a hegemonic state (the UK or US) promote a dominant set of norms globally; in the periphery, states may act as buffers against or transmission belts of such global economic norms, depending on the social composition of their ruling coalitions, itself an outcome of struggles between social forces that stand to gain or to lose from these norms; in MENA, the Arab republics institutionalized populism in their formative period, enabled by the congruence of then-existing global norms with their projects, but thereafter entered a post-populist phase under global neoliberalism 4) The post-populist Arab regimes that reneged on the populist contract offended people's sense of moral economy at cost of their legitimacy; this generated demands for a restoration of the contract and sparked rebellion against the failure of regimes to do so.

The paper first examines the historical roots of the populist social contract in the region's moral political economy, notably the struggle over popular rights in the 18th and 19th centuries; it then examines the post-independence rise and fall of populism in the Arab republics, showing the initial congruence of its rise with global norms and how the globalization of neo-liberal norms thereafter precipitated its fall. Finally it examines how the end of the populist contract precipitated the Arab uprisings that began in 2010.

The moral political economy of the region: the roots of the populist social contract

Although the populist social contract was institutionalized under the populist authoritarian republics that arose in the Arab world in the 1950-60s, they did not invent it; rather, they responded to a widespread expectation that they address the inegalitarian ills of the post-independence oligarchic order. Populism had deep roots in MENA's pre-capitalist political culture, the traditional moral economy within which, as Burke (1987, 1990) and Chalcraft document, many ordinary people expressed demands that government fulfil what they saw as its obligation to ensure a minimum of welfare, notions derived from custom, religion and Ottoman codes (Chalcraft 2016: 58, 63, 155). Among subaltern groups, certain rights or

¹ Although the study focuses on the Arab republics, with most evidence cited on Egypt, Tunisia, Syria and Algeria, since they are embedded in a moral and political economy shared with Turkey and Iran, the analysis considers the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) context.

entitlements were seen as part of natural justice, which, when taken away, regularly inspired protest and revolt (Frerichs 2014, 611). The spread of capitalist norms and practices in the 18th and 19th centuries, such as commodification of labour and expropriation of state or common land as private property, collided with pre-capitalist notions of justice, provoking what Chalcraft (2007) called “movements for self-protection,” mobilized to defend perceived existing rights against attempts to nullify them in the name of market forces. These took the forms of chronic protest and everyday forms of resistance, but also petitioning the state to arbitrate and regulate the market. At this point, popular demands were not for redistribution per se, but for restoration of inherited rights being revoked.

An early episode of norm clash was in late Ottoman times when peasants, who had traditionally enjoyed usufruct on what had been state-owned lands and considerable autonomy (Gerber 1987: 9-15), lost this with the importation--and abuse--of capitalist norms of private property in land (under the 1858 Ottoman land code), as notables (who had previously only had rights to collect taxes) now appropriated large estates (and could expel peasants); this, especially marked in the *Mashreq*, intensified under the British and French “mandates” when notables’ ownership of land was further conferred or confirmed as a way of eliciting their support. As peasants were reduced first to tenants and then to an agrarian proletariat, a deep sense of injustice came to pervade agrarian society, manifest in waves of peasant revolt from “everyday” forms of resistance, such as poor working habits and theft from the landlord, to petitions to the state demanding justice, as documented particularly in Egypt (Ghalwash 2016; Beinin 2001: 56-61, 86-93; Chalcraft 2016: 184-85, 265). Thus, Brown (1990 7, 90-92, 111,116) argued that Egyptian peasants had ways of evading or retaliating against taking away of their customary rights through confiscation of land and arbitrary rent rises, (183-6). Similarly, in Iraq the British rewarded collaborating tribal chiefs by according them absolute private property rights over what had been collective tribal land, a violation of the traditional moral economy that provoked eight rural uprisings from 1947 to 1958 against tribal shaykhs (Chalcraft 264-66; Gerber 1987: 119-122). Peasants land hunger was endemic and the belief that the land should belong to those who worked it (a updated interpretation of the formerly enjoyed right of usufruct) became a slogan adopted by peasant movements in Syria in the 1950s (Hanna 1975). In consequence, the post-Ottoman liberal oligarchic orders in the Arab states, (such as the king or prime minister led landlord-dominated assemblies in Egypt, Syria and Iraq) never achieved ideological hegemony, making them vulnerable to radical, often rural based, movements from the 1950s; the republican regimes that emerged from this milieu co-opted peasant expectations in widely adopting land reforms.

Similarly, among the urban poor, the expectation that government was responsible for ensuring provision of basics and regulating prices, above all that of bread, substantially pre-dates the establishment of the populist social contract in the 1950s. Thus, for example in Egypt in the 18th and 19th centuries, urban crowds attached merchant granaries believed to be profiteering while the Sultan of Morocco made sure he had grain reserves for times of food shortages--at a time when Britain used market rhetoric to evade responsibility to counter famines in Ireland and India (Harders 2003; Beinin and Lockman 1987: 91; Chalcraft 2016: 62, 146). What the populist regimes did was semi-formalize the contract as a condition of legitimacy so pervasive that Larbi Sadiki (1997) described it as *dimuqratiyyat al-khubz*, -- "democracy of bread."

In parallel, from the 19th century, the emerging working class sought protection in their guilds against commodification of labour; worker demands centred on job security and a living wage, an expectation of the indigenous moral economy reinforced by the global spread of socialism (Beinin and Lockman 1987; Chalcraft 2016: 154-58, 182, 267). Nationalism and populism went together: thus, the oligarchic regimes’ violations of the indigenous moral political economy was linked to their creation by or collaboration with imperialism. In Egypt from 1919 and through the 1920s mass labour strikes were precipitated by the nationalist struggle against the British but national and class grievances merged in protests against unfair dismissals and disciplinary fines imposed in foreign owned factories. In Iraq a 1948 mass urban uprising combined communist-led strikes by port and railway workers against violations of equity in labour practices with widespread revolt against the monarchy’s new treaty with Britain (Chalcraft 2016: 267). Generally, the radical nationalist movements emerging from the

1930s saw fighting imperialism as impossible without mobilizing the masses into public life and that meant giving them a material stake in the nation. Citizenship meant social, not just political rights, making populism a part of nation-building.

The nationalist movements that constituted the populist authoritarian republics in the fifties and sixties across the Arab world came out of this mass milieu in which populist norms were dominant (Gerber 1987: 148-61; Chalcraft 2016: 317-25; 385-93). Needing to legitimize themselves, they co-opted the normative expectations of their putative popular constituencies, forging social contracts institutionalized in ideologies, charters, and policies. These moral economy expectations were, fortuitously, congruent with norms hegemonic at the global level at the time (see below).

Explaining the rise and fall of populism:

The rise and fall of the populist social contract in the Arab republics resulted from the interaction between changing normative hegemony at the global level and regional reactions to it.

Global Political Economy: the “taming” of finance capital (1930-1980):

The 1930s crisis of capitalism, paralleled by the rise of socialism in Russia, started a rollback of the hitherto global dominance of financial capital. Under “embedded liberalism” (Ruggie 1982) states established controls over the flow of capital across borders and fixed exchange rates gave little scope for currency speculation. “Fordist” Keynesianism generated high productivity, economic stability and a long boom in national economies. The power balance between national capital, which had a stake in the prosperity of the home market, organised labour, and the state was associated with mixed economies (having public sectors) that allowed a broader sharing of the benefits of mass production and a welfare state (Gill 2003: 41-65, 159-189; Robinson 2002).

Class inequalities were everywhere under attack by egalitarian mass movements and revolution. The US hegemon and the Soviet counter hegemon converged on wealth redistribution as the capitalist West adopted equalizing measures to blunt the “subversive” appeal of communism. Dominant ideologies ranging from communism through social democracy, fascism and Keynesian liberalism all legitimized themselves by claims to deliver social equality.

In parallel, the spread of the sovereign states system to the ex-colonies, combined with bi-polarity, diffused power to the global peripheries (Clark 2001). De-colonization and alternative East Bloc sources of technology, capital and markets enabled more autonomous state-centric national economies in the LDCs. The developmental state—with a large role for the state in the economy—was widely advocated both by development economists in the West and popular movements in the periphery. There revolutions from below and above toppled old oligarchies, and populist ideologies—advocating wealth redistribution via a “middle way” between capitalism and communism—when mixed with third world nationalism—became hegemonic. The convergence of global constraints on finance capital, global bi-polarity and de-colonization created conditions in which global egalitarian norms such as socialism legitimized the norms of pre-capitalist moral economies in the periphery, albeit now in new populist-statist orders.

The Rise of the Arab World’s Populist Authoritarian Republics

The rise of populist authoritarian (PA) republics (1952-67) in the Arab world paralleled the global hegemony of egalitarian norms. They also reflected a distinct stage in “periphery” societies when the landed oligarchy was declining but an industrial capitalist class able to displace it had not emerged, leaving a leadership gap filled by military officers and intellectuals of petit bourgeois origin (Amin 1978). They created “Bonapartist” regimes, balancing populist alliances with the working and peasant classes and the bureaucratic and military arms of the state, to carry out ‘passive’ (after Gramsci, see Cox and Sinclair 1996: 129-30) ‘revolutions from above’

This responded to the crisis of the old oligarchic order. Egypt, where the prototype PA regime was first consolidated under Nasser, had been shaped under the British into a primary product exporter (cotton) but the falling world agricultural terms of trade, population growth, land fragmentation, rural unemployment and a 50% decline in per capita income from 1900-

1950--all meant more intensive development was required: industrialization and investment in human capital. However, the landed oligarchy stood in the way of the land reform needed to lift up the peasant majority and was adverse to investment in industry, while foreigners dominated finance. The perception became widespread among middle strata that a revolution was needed to unblock development. Similar scenarios unfolded in Syria, Iraq and across the Arab world's republics. It was the military that took the lead in initiating these 'revolutions from above' (Trimberger 1978)—resulting in the widespread displacement of *ancien regimes* by populist authoritarian republics.

Because most PA regimes did not come to power via mass revolution, but rather coups by factions of radical officers, they needed, in order to consolidate power at the expense of the old oligarchy and other rivals, to incorporate the middle and lower classes into a cross-class "populist" coalition. They represented themselves as nationalist regimes seeking to roll back the remnants of Western imperialism in the region and defend the Arab cause. Their economic project was built around state-led investment in Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI), infrastructure and hydraulic agriculture, aiming to initiate economic take-off and a break out from the Arab World's peripheral position in the global economy. A crucial leg of their project was a *populist social contract* in which their constituencies were offered social-economic benefits in return for political support. This included free education and state employment for the white-collar middle class; job security for workers in nationalized industries; and subsidized food for the urban poor. Land reform both demolished the dominance of the old oligarchy and incorporated the support of land reform peasants into regimes' social bases (See Hania, this issue). The project initially produced growth combined with raised living standards and falling inequality (in Nasserist Egypt the Gini index fell 1959-75 43 to 38). Substantial investments in education and health gave momentum to big increases in life expectancy and human development indicators. There was considerable upward mobility and significant poverty reduction compared to states that did not have populist revolutions (Adams and Page 2003).

Regional experts (Pratt 2007; Beinin 2001; Gerber 1987; Chalcraft 2016) agree that populist authoritarian achieved a measure of Gramscian hegemony—widespread consent. The old oligarchies were so discredited that the new regimes were widely welcomed and there was a consensus in favour of a national modernization project. Importantly, the authoritarian character of these regimes did not prevent a certain sense of inclusion among the masses that benefited from populist policies that corresponded to their sense of moral economy. Workers and peasants were included through corporatist organizations: Pripstein-Posusney (1997), dissecting the relation of the Nasser regime and the workers unions, showed that workers accepted the legitimacy of the regime's national project and in return for their contribution to it, the state provided secure employment and a living wage. Similarly, in Syria in the 1950s the Ba'th party mobilized a peasant constituency through its struggle with Syria's great feudal landlords and worker support through backing of trade unions and, after coming to power, it incorporated this popular social base through a "revolution from above" involving land reform, nationalizations and labour rights (Hinnebusch 2011a). What had been a notoriously unstable state was thereby stabilized.

That populism became hegemonic is indicated by PA regimes' ability to marginalise their competitors for mass loyalties—the Muslim Brotherhood and the Marxists--many of whom were co-opted. The populist policies of the Nasser regime were imitated by the subsequent wave of military revolutions that followed across the region. So incontestable did citizen entitlements appear at this time that the conservative monarchies,² even though they found Nasserism ideologically repugnant and had their own traditional legitimacy, still understood that they had to match the republics in providing welfare for citizens. Finally, the hegemony of populism was indicated by the fact that protests against authoritarian regimes that accompanied the move to neo-liberalism, notably the bread riots that rocked north Africa in the 1980s, typically were spurred by perceptions they were abandoning the populist contract and took the form of demands for its *restoration*, (*not* for democratization).

² In particular the GCC states with their growing oil revenues but also non-oil Jordan and Morocco, which had to rely on foreign aid.

Globalization: Neo-Liberalism and the Restoration of Anglo-American Finance Capital:

Populism, fundamentally at odds with the inequality-generating logic of finance capitalism, could only thrive in a global political economy when finance capital was in retreat. However, by the 1980s, Keysianism had been superseded by neo-liberalism. This originated, according to neo-Gramscian readings, in an effort by the US hegemon to make up for its loss of productive ascendancy under rising competition from Europe and Asia (Arrighi and Silver 2001) by restoring the global supremacy of its finance capital over their productive capital (Gill 2003: 41-65). What Harvey (2005) called a 'Wall Street-US Treasury-IMF complex' spread neo-liberal practices via transnational global networks of TNC chiefs, bankers, politicians and bureaucrats of the core states, operating through international institutions like the IMF and WTO (Cox and Sinclair 1996; Van der Pijl 1998; Robinson 2002). The move to neo-liberalism was in part enabled by the 1970s oil price boom that led to the stagflation of the 1970s in Europe, preparing the way for the assault on the Keynesian welfare state by Reaganomics/Thatcherism and making the neo-liberal alternative to Keysianism credible; while, in parallel, the MENA oil monarchies' recycling of petrodollars to US/UK banks and government bonds gave an enormous boost to the globalization of Anglo-American finance capital (Spiro 1999). Then came the 1990s collapse of communism: if, in the Cold War, the need to head off communist revolution had induced ruling classes to concede higher wages and welfare states in the core and decolonization in the periphery, now they looked to 'claw back' these concessions (Clark 2001; Halliday 2002).

As markets became global, corporations in the core lost the stake they had under Keysian Fordism in national economies and the prosperity of their workers and exited in search of cheap labour (Gill 2003: 93-115; Solomon 2002). The division of the world into states competing for investment allowed newly mobile finance capital to upset the previous balance of power among big capital, big labour and government, producing a 'race to the bottom' in terms of social standards and labour rights. Off-shore havens facilitated massive tax evasion, enervating the fiscal base of the welfare state (Rude 2004). The result was rapid growth in inequality. The richest 1% of the global population appropriated income equivalent to the poorest 57%; and the rich to poor income gap grew from 40:1 in 1975 to 64:1 by 1990 (Perrons, 2004: 35; Hartnett and Stengrim, 2006: 163).

In the periphery, neo-liberalism was spread by IFI's using debt leveraged structural adjustment to open up protected markets and force privatization of state industries, public spending cuts, tax breaks for investors and austerity for the masses. Under what Gill (2003:159-80) calls 'disciplinary constitutionalism,' disadvantageous trade and investment agreements imposed on the LDCs prioritised property and investor rights, dismantled capital controls and reorganised domestic capitalism to be compatible with the requirements of Western finance capital, driving a move from national development strategies beneficial to later developers toward a single neo-liberal model that benefited the core (Gowan 1999). This was enabled by the co-optation of LDC elites who were brought to believe that there was no alternative to neo-liberalism after the collapse of socialism and Keysianism---and that they would benefit from it. Thus, periphery states came to act as 'transmission belts' (Cox and Sinclair 1996) for the enforcement of capitalist discipline on periphery peoples. Besides such structural (market, ideological) power, coercion was also needed as globalization inevitably generated resistance from its victims (Petras & Veltmeyer 2005). Moreover, after the Cold war, the US hegemon could use overt military means to open up and subordinate markets and energy sources, as in the invasion of Iraq. As Gowan (2004) put it, militarised empire is the political superstructure of globalization.

Finally, global neo-liberalism drove a shrinking of effective political inclusion. Even as *procedural* democracy was ostensibly spread globally, *substantive* democracy (that would empower ordinary people to protect their socioeconomic rights) was hollowed out. In the core, the economic policies of most political parties converged on the neo-liberal consensus, while big money and corporate media biased elections (Cavatorta 2010; Hay 2007; Gill 2003: 93-142; Lindberg 2019). The function of states was reconfigured away from the provision of social needs to the competition for finance capital (Cox and Sinclair 1996: 191-208). In the periphery the dominant regime types were ranged on a continuum between "hybrid" competitive authoritarianism (e.g. Egypt under Mubarak; Morocco) and what Robinson (2002) called "low

intensity democracy”—a purely procedural pluralism in which the big issues of economic distribution were effectively removed from the political agenda (contemporary Tunisia might qualify).

Post-Populist Authoritarian:

Global actors could not impose neo-liberalism in MENA except through the “transmission belt” of the Middle Eastern state. The apparent exhaustion of populism provided the structural conditions for this. As Waterbury (1991) argued, part of the legitimacy of the populist formula was that, by contrast to both pre-Keynesian capitalism and Stalinism, it did not engage in a highly coercive extraction of surplus from labour but rather delivered increases in their living standards. Whether this was “premature Keynesianism” in Waldner’s (1999) term—distribution before production had reached the stage to enable mass welfare without retarding capital accumulation—is debatable. But the combination of high investment in development and redistributory policies dictated by populism, military expenditures, lost wars and corruption depleted savings and capital accumulation in the populist authoritarian republics. ISI started out by depending on imports of machinery to produce manufactured goods for home market consumption but the absence of manufacture exports plus falling prices of agricultural exports created balance of payments difficulties. Populist benefits for families encouraged population explosions and free higher education created bulges of educated youth who could not be absorbed into employment. Populism was economically sustainable to the extent primary products got good prices, as would be so of oil in the 1970s, but in the mid-1980s, the collapse of oil prices issued in stagnation and debt in many MENA states, making them vulnerable to the demands of the emerging neo-liberal order. Populism had also been sustained by assistance from the core economies, in part owing to Cold War rivalries, but with Soviet collapse, such resources also contracted.

However, the agency behind the transformation of MENA states into transmission belts of neo-liberalism was provided by emerging new ‘post-populist’ ruling coalitions. The authoritarian republics over time generated a new dominant class alliance of the ‘state bourgeoisie,’ (high paid military officers, state managers and bureaucrats), with a revived private bourgeoisie of contractors and middlemen doing business with the state. As the public sector was exhausted as a source of wealth and careers, the state bourgeoisie looked to economic liberalization to diversify the state’s economic base as well as to provide opportunities for it to invest its accumulated wealth, and thereby transform itself into a property-owning class. The reviving private bourgeoisie saw new opportunities in neo-liberal “*infatih*” (opening) for foreign partners and to acquire public sector assets. The new post-populist ruling coalitions were increasingly receptive to globalization (Dodge and Higgott 2002, 13-35; Waterbury 1991; Ehteshami and Murphy 1993).

Typically, partial liberalization, beginning in the seventies and eighties, first opened MENA countries to import booms facilitating enrichment of politically-connected merchants granted import monopolies but also often bankrupting local industries and leading to deficits and debt. Debt gave the IMF leverage to push its neo-liberal agenda, particularly the rollback of the state’s role in the economy and in delivering welfare—all done in the name of “structural adjustment.” Government expenditure of MENA states fell precipitously from more than fifty percent of GDP in the 1970s to twenty-two percent in the early 1990s and with it state capacity (Cammatt and Diwan 2013: ESCSA 1918: 11-12). Later, IFI’s privatization demands were used by regime elites and crony or foreign capitalists to acquire public sector assets on the cheap (King 2009; Heydemann 2004; Guazzone and Pioppi 2009; Cammett and Diwan 2013). Reviving capitalism meant investors had to be favoured through reduction of labour rights and wages while IMF demands for structural adjustment and debt repayment legitimized austerity for the masses (while leaving intact military purchases from Western arms dealers). In essence, regimes started to *renege on the populist social contract*.³

This was legitimized at the elite level by neo-liberal globalization discourse. Thus, just as the global hegemony of Keynesianism and socialism had earlier legitimized attacks on the

³ Advocates of neo-liberalism would claim that regional states never fully enacted neo-liberal reforms. However, it could be replied that such ideal norms are never enacted anywhere and thus that claims that if they are enacted that they will produce growth are largely unsupported.

oligarchy and populist redistribution in MENA, so now the norm promoted by global finance capital that scarce capital and managerial talent deservedly commanded exceptional rewards (justified in terms of trickle-down economics) was reflected in elite behaviour in MENA, beginning with the appropriation of national hydrocarbon wealth by ruling dynasties in the oil monarchies which inevitably stimulated envy among republican leaders who aspired to match the new elite lifestyle (Hinnebusch 2011b); as Heikal (1975) observed, massive oil rents briefly available in the 1970s transformed the normative context from “thawra” (revolution)—to “tharwa” (resources) in which republican and monarchic elites converged on the ambition to get rich. Because in monarchies the distinction between the king’s purse and the state treasury was blurred, enrichment was more acceptable; getting rich in the republics, however, normally meant illegal and illicit practices that widely corrupted political life.

The outcome was the creation of what has been called “crony capitalism.” Privatization provided good pickings for “networks of privilege” (Heydemann 2004)--speculative foreign capital and ruling elites and businessmen with insider connections (Abdul Khalek 2001)--to turn public into private monopolies. In parallel, the military acquired a stake in crony capitalism by spreading its tentacles into the civilian economy in several states (Marshall and Stacher 2013; Said 2018). In Algeria IMF demands led to a big sell off of 1000 public enterprises in 1996-97 allowing elites to use corruptly gained funds to buy public assets and build clientalist networks (King 2009: 145-69). In Egypt 500 firms came to be controlled by 32 businessmen (most of whom held political posts in the mid-2000s) that got 60% of corporate profits but only employed 11% of the formal private labour force. In Tunisia, the firms appropriated by President Ben Ali’s entourage made over 21% of private sector profits but produced only 3% of output and employed 1% of the labour force.

Crony capitalism provided little new skilled employment because investment concentrated in fields where capital remained mobile--tourism, commerce and services, rather than industry (which declined as a proportion of GNP and investment); politically-unconnected investors were deterred and small firms lacked access to capital. The result was the tertiarization of the MENA economy and an absence of more productive medium sized firms (ESCWA 1918L 19). The new private sector did not invest enough to make up for the decline in public sector investment and instead exported its capital: MENA has suffered the world’s highest capital flight as a percentage of GNP (100%) with \$150-200 billion in foreign banks or financial markets in the 1990s (Guerrieri 1997; Padoan 1997).

Just as neo-liberalism drove inequality at the global level, so its regional analogue, crony capitalism, drove it in MENA.⁴ In the crony capitalist sector good jobs went to well-connected clients, feeding a public equation of economic liberalism with corruption and inequality (ESCWA 2018: 18). The rollback in labour rights, ending job security without according the right to strike, and the reversal of land reforms, drove down the share of labour in GDP to the advantage of capital. Declines in public employment opportunities, subsidy cuts and wage squeezes hurt workers and the poor. As such, in 1991-95, in Egypt the share of GDP of the poorest 20% of population fell from 3.9 to 1.7% while the richest 20% share increased from 20 to 26%. Over the period 1996 to 2005 there was a further 17% increase in inequality (Azzawi 2010). Poverty doubled 1990-91 to 1995-96; in 1996-2000 overall poverty indicators briefly improved but thereafter absolute poverty increased from 16.7% in 2000 to 19.6% in 2005 (Bush 2003; World

⁴ Different studies report contradictory findings on inequality and poverty, varying according to their methods and periods studied. Several World Bank studies that show relatively low poverty and inequality in MENA, at odds with perceptions in the region, may reflect the fact that the positive effects of the populist era were only gradually eroded. Second, regarding inequality, surveys miss the highest income strata, underestimating inequality by up to 30% according to Alvaredo et. al. (2017). Thus, the failure to statistically capture the explosion in the wealth of those at the top, plus the impoverishment of the state-employed middle class, might have made inequality appear to be moderate, even declining (ESCWA 2018: 45). Third, surveys do not measure wealth inequality or increases in inequality of opportunity as state employment shrunk and public education declined (See ESCWA 2018; Abu Ismail and Kiswani 2018; Cammett and Diwani 2013). As for poverty levels, at the global level, the vast majority of poverty eradication took place in East Asia where statist practices had constrained neo-liberal hegemony while in MENA the abandonment of such practices seems reflected in figures on the--far from exceptional--increases in poverty in Egypt found, e.g. by Azzawi (2010).

Bank 2007; Azzawi 2010: 2). As neo-liberalization continued to bite under General al-Sisi, poverty rates reached 32.5% in 2018 (AP, "Egypt says a third of population lives in poverty," 30 July 2019). In parallel, there was a big increase in billionaires: in Egypt a few families controlled close to 24% of GNP (ESCWA 2018: 37).

The rural areas especially suffered from neo-liberalism. With the reversal of Nasser's tenancy laws in the 1990s, more than a million peasants lost secure land tenure, their main livelihood and pride. Girls were taken out of school as their families lost access to land. For peasants the world was turned upside down, feudalism had returned and the government blamed for depriving people of their livelihood in violation of the natural rights extended to them in the populist period (Saad 2003; Bush 2003). In Algeria, Benjedid returned nationalized land to former owners at the expense of peasants while in Tunisia an agrarian counter-revolution dismantled peasant cooperatives and transferred 600,000 hectares to a rural elite at below market rates with support from a World Bank loan (King 2009).

The move to post-populism was continually contested from below, delaying but never wholly reversing it. The first major episode of resistance was the 1977 food riots in Egypt when IMF-dictated cuts in subsidies produced an uprising in which protestors attacked symbols of the new rich, forcing the regime to roll back the subsidy slashes (see Loewe and Vidican Auktor in this special issue on the most recent subsidy cuts in MENA countries). In global neo-liberal discourse food subsidies were "wasteful" but removing them ran up against the "strong sense of entitlement" among the people (Salevurakis and Abdul Halim 2008). Food riots followed elsewhere across the region in response to similar IMF pressures for structural adjustment, often forcing governments to retreat (Seddon 1989; Sadiki 1997) and to resort to austerity by stealth (e.g. through salamy tactics). In parallel, as worker protections were removed in tandem with privatizations of public industry, workers' strikes escalated, notably in Egypt under the 2004 Nazif "government of businessmen" (Beinin 2008). Nationalist issues intertwined with resistance to populist rollback: thus, the 2003 anti-Iraq war movement in Egypt intersected with waves of workers strikes against privatization and discontent over cuts in subsidized bread to spawn the 6 April and the Kifaya movements that prepared the way for the 2011 Uprising. In Tunisia an export-oriented development strategy required driving down wages and the repression of trade unions' general strikes by the military. IMF pressure on the regime to remove subsidies was countered by the 1984 food riots, but in the 1990s World Bank demands for reduction in worker protections, led Ben Ali to purge and subordinate the unions (Murphy 1999).

Such rollbacks of the populist social contract, especially when combined with the "off-loading" of state welfare responsibilities to Islamist charities, also, inadvertently, made regimes vulnerable to the rise of Islamic opposition movements that attracted those strata frozen out of regime networks or dependent on Islamist charities (Heyderian: 95-127). The struggle over post-populist transition took the most extreme form in Algeria where it unleashed civil war. In Algeria's October 1988 riots, a function of austerity measures accompanying oil price falls, protestors targeted elite districts, demanding what they considered their "rights" and denouncing egregious liberalizer, President Benjedid. When army killings further spread protests, he promised political reform. However, when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won elections, the army annulled them and outlawed the Islamists; the resulting insurgency was only defeated after years of draconian repression by a harder version of authoritarianism (Chalcraft 466-75: King 2009: 145-69)

A new social contract based on political democratization might have been devised to substitute for the populist one and, indeed, in a number of Arab countries citizens were promised greater political rights in return for giving up economic entitlements (Meijer 2017). However, the result was tightly controlled--political liberalization, not full democratization--and reversible. Full democratization was deterred by several factors. "Post-populist" ruling coalitions included crony capitalists that would be threatened by democratic transparency and foreign investors who expected a roll back of populist labour rights. Elites reversing the accepted social contract could not expect to win fair elections. As such, regimes sought instead to manage the loss of mass support through techniques of "authoritarian upgrading"—various mixtures of co-optation and divide and rule. Privatization of state industries provided regimes with new patronage resources to foster supportive crony capitalists (King 2008; Amirah, this

issue). Political liberalization was lopsided--designed to relatively empower those who would benefit from and support neo-liberalism and to demobilize its victims. Thus, opposition parties were allowed to compete for parliamentary seats, but denied the right to politically organize the masses. The interest groups of the bourgeoisie were given greater corporatist and parliamentary access to power, but workers' unions were brought under stricter control and excluded from the access to decision-makers they had enjoyed in the populist era (Kienle 2001; Glasser 2001; Heydemann 2004; Hinnebusch 2006).

Consequences of Post-Populism: the Arab Uprising?

For liberals, the Arab Uprisings marked the embrace of liberalism and democracy in the last region seemingly resistant to them. By contrast, radical political economists attributed the Uprisings to the spread of neo-liberalism. For scholars such as Aschar (2013), Hanieh (2013), Heyderian (2014:1-5) and Cammett and Diwan (2013), the abandonment of the "Arab developmental model," the opening of economies to the shocks of financial globalization, the plunder of public assets under crony capitalism, and the narrowing of the authoritarian social coalition were to blame. For Bush and Ayeub (2012: 4, 6), the uprisings capped a decade of resistance to neo-liberalization in which "Egypt developed but Egyptians did not" (see also Solava Ibrahim, this issue). Since the regimes overthrown were *both* authoritarian and *post-populist*, how can we tell whether the former or the latter mattered most? Were the uprisings chiefly *a backlash against neo-liberal globalization or its triumph*? What further complicates the issue is that the uprisings were mounted by cross-class coalitions in which different components had somewhat different grievances; the Westernized upper middle class youth that spearheaded the mobilization did seem to be motivated by democracy demands; but for the lower middle class declining job opportunities and for the poor, the rising price of subsistence goods mattered; it is entirely likely that both explanations are right but for different participants in the uprisings and that many protest participants had mixed motives. Moreover, most protestors would have understood that *political* changes were needed to restore what they saw as lost socio-economic rights. Still, three kinds of evidence support the hypothesis that backlash was the more powerful driver: the attitudes of the Arab public and the timing and distribution of the uprisings.

Public Attitudes: the insufficiency of procedural democracy

The reports of the Arab Transformation Project (Abbot and Teti 2017), which brought together the findings of numerous polls,⁵ reveal that the main demand of the protestors was *not* for procedural liberal democracy (competitive elections, political rights) *alone* but for substantive democracy--*socio-economic rights* (i.e. the social democracy that was simultaneously being hollowed out in much of the core). The main grievances were lack of economic opportunity and, indicative of the perceived illegitimacy of crony capitalism, the high perceived levels of corruption: as causes of the uprising, respondents mentioned economic problems first (56% in Egypt and 48% in Tunisia) and corruption second while political rights and/or an end to authoritarian rule were nominated by under a quarter in Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia. To be sure, the middle class put higher value on democratization and the working classes on socio-economic grievances. All seemed to value political accountability (however that might be delivered) in the pervasive backlash against the abuses of the security forces expressed in protestors' demands for dignity. Yet enthusiasm for procedural democracy was generally tempered: e.g. about 40% in Egypt and Tunisia thought citizens were not ready for it, and while roughly half thought democracy was superior, another half wanted some form of Islamist regime or a secular authoritarian regime. Many came to prioritize order (indicated by the remarkably high (over 60%) support for the police. Disorder plus intensified repression, disillusioned many: support for democracy declined from 2011 to 2014 (from 55-60 to 45%) and undemocratic government was noticeably low among the challenges identified by respondents in Egypt (5.2%), Jordan (4.1%) and Tunisia (20%) in 2014. While in the immediate aftermath of the uprisings there were high expectations of positive change, these were dashed

⁵ They draw on Arab Barometer II for 2011, AB III for 2013, AfroBarometer (AfB) 5 and 6 [only Egypt and Tunisia] and their own opinion survey in Egypt, Tunisia, and Jordan.

by governments' continued neo-liberal policies and political strife: in 2014, only a minority of respondents thought the uprising had been positive for their country (12% of Egyptians and 31% of Tunisians) and most thought the economic situation had deteriorated significantly compared to 2009 (See also Solava Ibrahim, this issue). Tunisia, the country with the most substantial procedural democracy, registered the highest dissatisfaction regarding socio-economic issues: the food riots of 2018 indicated that democratization was not substituting for the ability to deliver basic welfare as a standard of legitimacy (Hilali, 2018).

This is not to say that protestors lacked political demands: their widespread calls for the "fall of the regime" were indicative of how far alienation had gone beyond a mere demand to restore food subsidies that had been typical of the food riots of the past decades. Now, as their slogans, "Bread, Freedom, Social Justice" indicated, political and socio-economic change were seen as intimately interconnected. But this is quite compatible with the strong tendency by Arab publics to accord government legitimacy according to outcomes (*as exemplified in the expectations of the populist contract*), rather than being satisfied solely with procedural democracy (Armbrust 2011; Cammett and Diwan 2013). Indeed, for them, the neo-liberal attempt to insulate the economic sphere from politics (excluding issues such as the distribution of wealth and economic rights from the political agenda) would have been seen as emptying democracy of meaning. Indeed, when queried on the *meaning* of democracy, a quarter to a half mentioned competitive elections or political rights but 60-80% *defined* it in terms of delivering socio-economic welfare.

The Timing of the Uprising: Finance capital drives a food crisis

Another way of estimating the relative weight of the social contract in explaining the uprising is timing: why did the Uprisings start in 2010 after authoritarian regimes had showed remarkable resilience for a half century? Was there evidence that the violation of the contract had become particularly egregious in the period leading up to its outbreak? Given the centrality of affordable bread to the populist social contract (Meijer 2017: 91), if we find a correlation between levels of rise in food prices and anti-regime mobilization, this would be evidence that the renegeing on the social contract was central to the revolts. Contrary evidence that democracy mattered more would be if reversals of limited democratization immediately preceded the uprisings. In Egypt the 2010 elections, reversing earlier political liberalization, probably did increase the alienation of the middle class, but there was no comparable reversal elsewhere.

On the other hand, a food crisis did afflict the region in the years before the uprising, rooted in regional vulnerability to the neo-liberal world market. Egypt is the iconic case: in 1960, Egypt was producing enough wheat to be almost self-sufficient but by 2010 it was importing roughly half its total wheat, making it the biggest wheat importer in the world. For awhile, food riots there (as well as in Tunisia and Morocco) had deterred regimes from fully succumbing to IMF pressures to eliminate food subsidies, with their retention, ironically, made possible because of cheap surplus grains made available by the US to its clients in the Middle East. The United States provided Egypt with \$4.6 billion in loans and grants for food between 1979 and 1997. However, this and IFI pressures to reduce state aid to agriculture--even as the West continued it to its own agriculture, thereby producing surpluses exported to MENA--hollowed out regional agriculture and made states over-dependent on food imports from the West, particularly as export crops replaced food crops sold on the local market. Of the top 20 wheat importers for 2010, almost half were Middle Eastern countries (Ciezadlo 2011; Zurayk 2011; Heyderian 2014: 174-85).

Such dependence made them particularly vulnerable to the food crisis of the late 2000s. This crisis was in good part a function of global financialization and deregulation encouraged by neo-liberalism. The 2008 collapse of banks and financial markets in the West, rooted in speculative casino capitalism, plus the creation of commodity index funds, funnelled speculative investors into supposedly safe food markets, helping to push up world food prices in 2008-11 (Heyderian 2014: 76-94; Harrigan 2014). By early 2011, food prices had reached what the World Bank called "dangerous levels," pushing 44 million people into extreme poverty (Ciezadlo 2011). As Kaufman (2010: 34) put it, "Bankers had taken control of the world's food, money chased money and a billion people went hungry."

Global food price shocks translated rapidly into MENA price hikes with inflation increasing at twice the global speed. In Egypt, bread prices rose by 37 percent between February 2007 and February 2008 and long bread lines stimulated protests, with those among factory workers generating the April 6 Movement that would later play a role in Egypt's Uprising; an alarmed President Mubarak ordered the army to take over the baking and distribution of subsidized bread to the public (Ciezadlo 2011). In 2008, bread protests spread to Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon and Yemen. Thus, the manipulation of international food prices by global finance capital artificially created a food crisis in MENA that set the stage for the uprising: spikes in bread prices made regimes' renegeing on the populist social contract highly visible and immediately experienced by the mass of the population. Uprising demonstrators made the connection to bread explicit: in Tunisia and Yemen, they brandished loaves of bread and in Egypt their slogan was "bread, freedom and social justice" (Ciezadlo 2011, Hafez 2013). The regional moral economy had come into collision with the predatory speculative activities of global finance capital (Headey and Fan (2010); Kamrava and Babar (2012).

The Uneven Distribution of the Uprisings: the vulnerability of republics

If renegeing on the populist social contract was the main driver of the Uprisings, authoritarian regimes that sustained it should have experienced much less severe rebellion while if democratic aspirations were the driver all authoritarian regimes would likely have faced comparable uprisings.

In fact, the Uprisings were experienced unevenly across the Arab world: while the republics were widely destabilized the monarchies, Bahrain aside, seemed relatively immune. The difference arguably comes down to two factors, variation in ability to sustain the populist social contract and differences in the mix of legitimacy (ruling bargains) on which these different regimes were founded. Both factors support assessments that the Arab Uprising was a direct consequence of regimes' renegeing on the populist contract.

First, the monarchies' greater oil resources and smaller populations (and reliance on non-citizen labour unentitled to any social rights) enabled them to sustain the contract for their citizens. Indeed, Saudi Arabia famously distributed massive handouts to them, and made rent available to non-oil Jordan and Morocco to similarly appease their populations (Shehadeh 2011; Heyderian 128-50). But, additionally, the monarchies' legitimacy was not wholly dependent on such distribution since they also enjoyed traditional (patriarchal, religious) legitimacy based less on a *contract* between government and citizens than on traditional deference of subjects to religiously legitimized rulers, notably preached by Saudi style salafism (Wahhabism).

The republics, with much less favourable rent to population ratios in all cases but Libya, lacked the resources to sustain the contract. But this was also much more dangerous for them because their legitimacy was constructed around the nationalist/populist ruling bargain, rather than traditional legitimacy; hence, renegeing on it left them wholly without legitimacy resources. This is especially so since most had also forfeited the associated nationalist component of the contract through close alignments with the West.

The case of Syria illustrates the complex interaction between legitimacy and the populist contract. The Ba'th regime was based on a more robust populist social contract than most of the authoritarian republics. It had risen out of the villages and penetrated and incorporated them via land reform and party organization. Under Hafiz al-Asad, peasant producers enjoyed subsidized inputs and got good state prices for crops. As a result, Syria enjoyed rising rural incomes, and increased agricultural surpluses. It became self-sufficient in grains, enabling the provision of cheap bread for urban consumers without reliance on the international grain market. After 2000, however, under Bashar al-Asad's neo-liberal reforms, subsidies were whittled away, e.g. on diesel fuel used for pump irrigation, at the very time when the unprecedented and punishing drought of 2006-11 hit many of the grain growing eastern provinces of the country, causing whole villages to be deserted and mass migration to urban slums. This enervated the Ba'th's rural populist base and, indeed, a main component of the opposition to the regime during the uprising came from the rural underclass, often such migrants who, feeling victimized and neglected by the regime, turned into the foot soldiers of Islamist rebellion. The Syrian regime had, unlike the other republics, kept its nationalist credentials but without the populist element, it was not enough (Hinnebusch and Zintl 2014).

Symptomatic of the centrality of the populist contract was that, even amidst the uprising, the regime continued the delivery of subsidized bread in areas where it still governed in order to demonstrate that the Ba'thist state was still meeting its historic responsibilities; and the rival "Islamic State" also made a big show of taking over flour mills and delivering subsidized bread (see Mara and Ariel, this issue).

In summary, the states whose legitimacy was dependent on the social contract—acknowledging popular sovereignty in principle and reneged on it in practice—namely, the post-populist republics, were most vulnerable to the uprising while those whose legitimacy was not based on popular sovereignty and also had the resources to continue or increase material benefits to citizens—the oil monarchies—were the least vulnerable.

Conclusion

Both rulers and ruled in the Arab World's republics were aware that the populist social contract, epitomized by the guarantee of affordable bread to the population, was part of the "ruling bargain." It was embedded in the region's traditional moral economy and the congruence of the latter with the dominant egalitarian norms at the global level during the era of retreat by finance capital (1930-80) enhanced the hegemony of populist-nationalist discourse in the Arab world and enabled the institutionalization of the populist social contract in the authoritarian republics. However, the rise of neoliberalism and the restored dominance of globalized finance capital was incongruent with populism at the regional level. This led to the reconstitution of populist ruling coalitions incorporating the masses into post-populist ones excluding them and privileging crony capitalists. Reneging on the populist social contract and unwilling to replace it with a new contract, regimes resorted to "authoritarian upgrading." The Arab uprising was more a reaction against globalization than a triumph of it since protestors' demands were less for the purely procedural low intensity democracy promoted under neo-liberalism than for a more inclusive and just political order that would revalidate the moral political economy, as incorporated in the old populist social contract. The latter, however was not compatible with global neo-liberalism.

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