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Ethnicity and Tribalism
in Arab Transitions

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>> In spite of elections and constitutional reforms, the political integration of tribal and ethnic minorities in several countries with majority Arab populations remains incomplete. In some countries, tribes are influential and a part of the established political landscape, but in others they remain marginalised and survive on the economic and political fringe. Past international experiences of democratisation show that successful transitions tend to transcend regional, ethnic and economic differences, and are usually led by broad-based coalitions. However, in countries where significant minorities become estranged from the political majority, democratic practices often degenerate into political paralysis or violence – or even cause regime change.

The southern Mediterranean countries that are currently undergoing political reforms all have majority Arab populations. But their distinct regional identities and histories could present severe challenges to the stability of their new political orders. On the other hand, if they are properly integrated into the developing political infrastructure, tribal customs and regional differences could contribute to these countries' successful democratic development. In Libya, Egypt and Yemen, tribal traditions have thrived in the absence of effective representative governance. Sheiks often function as community leaders and are adept at building consensus. In Jordan, tribal communities have formed the backbone of the Hashemite monarch's political base and maintain a significant parliamentary presence. As Arab countries undergo political reform, the way in which transitional regimes deal with tribes and ethnic minorities has an important part to play in their country's democratisation process, whether as potential spoiler or promoter.

HIGHLIGHTS

• Constitution drafting in Arab countries offers an opportunity for the political integration of ethnic minorities and tribes.

• Tribal structures are an integral part of many Arab societies and will be a necessary part of the democratisation process.

• Lessons from successful transitions in the past point to inclusive coalition politics and the construction of political institutions based on civic, not ethnic identities.

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>>>>>> **TRIBES AND ETHNIC MINORITIES
AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS**

Ethnic and tribal affiliations have been important in the transitions that are under way after the 2011 and 2012 uprisings in the MENA region, most particularly in Libya, and to a lesser degree, in Egypt. By contrast, in Tunisia, a country with a relatively homogenous population, ethnicity has played only a marginal role. Ethnic and tribal affiliations have also been influential in some countries that fell short of regime change but did embark on constitutional and legal reform processes, such as Morocco, Jordan and, to a lesser degree, Algeria.

Libya's Moammar Gaddafi revoked the tribe as a legal unit and reorganised local administrative structures according to the interests of his regime. But tribes remained socially and politically influential both during and after the colonel's rule. Primarily a mix of Arabs and Berbers, with Touareg and Tebu minorities in the south, the tribal system often performed the functions of political parties and civil society organizations, which Gaddafi had abolished following the 1969 coup d'état. Although some tribes worked actively with the regime, they also stood up to Gaddafi when it furthered their political interests. For example, tribes from Cyrenaica revolted repeatedly against the regime in the 1980s and 1990s, and defections from influential tribes also provided the decisive edge in the successful 2011 rebellion against the Gaddafi regime.

After Gaddafi's ouster and the full transfer of power to the newly elected General National Congress (GNC), the new Libyan government inherited some of the weakest state institutions in the region, along with a population with a fragile sense of nationhood. For many citizens, their regions or their tribes, some of which continue to control economically significant resources such as oil fields, are more meaningful than the distant central state. As the process of drafting the constitution continues, with Tripoli favouring centralised power and the eastern and southern regions preferring federalism, tribes with strong communal networks

will continue to be influential in the political process. Mahmoud Jibril's National Forces Alliance won 39 out of 80 seats reserved for party candidates in the 200-member General National Congress in the July 2012 elections, with the remaining 120 seats reserved for independents with no political affiliation, and the GNC's political disposition remains unclear. Little is known about these parliamentarians' political leanings, but since the majority of Libyans are affiliated with tribes, tribal interests are likely to continue to dominate the country's future political discourse.

The ultimate success of Libya's transition will in large part depend on Tripoli's ability to work constructively with the country's tribal and regional representatives, and to reconcile their diverse interests with the requirements of an orderly transition to democracy. Although the tribes contributed to Moammar Gaddafi's departure, they have also consolidated power in their own regions and, on occasions, have used their militias to impose extra-legal rule. As the 11 September 2012 attacks against the American Consulate in Benghazi demonstrated, the government does not control all regions, and militias – some tribal, others ideologically or religiously oriented – continue to challenge the central government's authority.

Unlike in Libya, ethnic minorities in Egypt are not strong enough to seriously confront the central government. The main ethnicity-related challenge during the transition is the political and economic empowerment of the Bedouin and Nubian minorities, communities that are mostly concentrated in remote areas of the Sinai, the New Valley and Upper Egypt. Throughout Egypt's history, both the Bedouin and Nubian communities have remained largely marginalised from the political process. During the Mubarak era, the government persistently ignored these communities' needs and at times persecuted tribal members. Though the 2011 revolution inspired hopes of democracy and transitional justice, hundreds of the Bedouins who were arbitrarily jailed under Mubarak on terrorism and smuggling charges remain imprisoned without trial.

Bedouins have in recent months increasingly taken extra-legal measures to protest marginalisation and advance their own agendas, among other actions, blocking roads, breaking into governmental buildings, taking hostages and surrounding the Multinational Force and Observers Sinai base. The deterioration of the security situation on the Sinai peninsula is more and more perceived as a potential threat to the Egyptian transition. The deadly attacks on 5 August 2012 by militant Islamists against the Egyptian Army checkpoint near the Israeli border have reinforced domestic and international concerns over the transitional government's ability to ensure security on the Sinai. At the same time, Sinai's Bedouin population has expressed frustration at the ineffective government efforts to secure the area, and has made clear through the media its desire to organise in self-defence.

Although elections have been held and constitutional reforms are moving forward, many tribal and ethnic minority communities remain outside the political process

With many parallels to Egypt's Bedouin and Nubian minorities, the North African Berber (Amazigh) communities who predominantly live in Morocco and Algeria are also trying to achieve meaningful levels of political and economic inclusion. Although Berbers make up a large portion of the population – between 40 and 57 per cent in Morocco and roughly 25 per cent in Algeria – their advancement into the upper levels of the political sphere has been frustrated. In Algeria, the Berber language has been recognised as a national language since 2001, with a status lower in significance than Arabic, Algeria's official language. Morocco elevated the Tamazight language to official language status in the course of the 2011 constitutional reform. In both countries, Berbers agitate for more political recognition and speak out against the economic marginalisation of their communities.

In Yemen, one of the chief demands of street protesters was a more politically inclusive and democratic regime that integrates youth as well as the often excluded south. An inclusive process will be critical to the success of the national dialogue which is expected to take place in 2013. Under Saleh, tribal elites were deeply entrenched in the patronage system, with some sheiks holding considerable economic interests in Yemen's opaque private sector. Some may charge that tribal leaderships hold their personal interests above that of their community and may consider the tribal system an obstacle to democratisation. But the tribal system in Yemen also works to make up for the formal institutions' governance deficit. Tribes often function as small political units, and many Yemenis hold their local tribal institutions in higher regard than the formal local institutions or the central government in Sanaa. Tribal customs serve as a social compact between community leaders and their kinsmen and continue to function well in areas such as dispute resolution. The power and legitimacy of tribal leaders is derived primarily from their ability to forward their people's interests or peacefully resolve disputes, and they are often backed by tribal members and by militias. So, the political exclusion of influential tribal leaders could lead to political gridlock or even violence.

In Jordan, close engagement with tribes has been a political necessity for the Hashemite monarchy. Tribes are well represented in the legislature and tribal members dominate the political and military worlds. Aside from the Islamic Action Front party, political parties are weak and tribal connections remain a candidate's shortcut to office. Many Jordanian parliamentarians function in much the same manner as the traditional patronage system, where the central power figure maintains legitimacy and power mainly through his ability to provide direct benefits to his network of clients. However, evidence also demonstrates that tribal traditions may to some degree complement democratic development. Because Jordan has no ⟩⟩⟩⟩⟩⟩

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strong party infrastructure, some candidates have turned to traditional networks for logistical support and fundraising, so the tribal system in some cases provides the electoral infrastructure needed for candidates to be successful. Also, some tribes run their own internal elections to determine who will represent their tribe in the general elections. While these tribal primaries are hardly institutionalised, individuals who have participated said that these contests were generally free and fair, with both men and women eligible to participate.

Previous international experiences may provide some clues for how Libya, Egypt and Yemen should work with their ethnic minorities and tribes during their transitional period.

LESSONS FROM INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Post-apartheid South Africa has often been described as a model inclusive transition, in that it successfully reconciled the country's divergent ethnic, tribal and regional interests. By contrast, the cases of Nigeria, Mexico and Bosnia-Herzegovina provide an example of the challenges of democratic reforms when ethnicity and regionalism become the dominant political considerations.

Tribal governance structures can help to advance democratisation when they fill a power vacuum and support the gradual building of democratic governance structures. But they hinder democratisation when they permanently replace formal institutions and perpetuate incumbent power through entrenched patronage systems. In many countries in post-colonial Africa, newly established borders arbitrarily cut across tribal boundaries, thereby laying the foundations for many ethnically motivated disputes. Many politicians paid lip service to democratisation while still attending to tribal patronage networks that contributed to their power base. Post-colonial Nigerian federalism was launched with the political integration of all three of the country's main ethnicities: the Ibos, Yorubas and Hausa-Fulanis. The Nigerian structure defined three administrative entities that roughly matched each community's geographic boundaries, giving each ethnic group and its region significant autonomy within a federal system. However, political rivalries and distrust among the major ethnic groups, together with corruption and the disintegration of the military and civil services, transformed the once hopeful democratic experiment into a country where private interests hold disproportionate influence over politics.

If the leadership ensures a politically inclusive process and strikes a balance between national unity and regional autonomy, ethnic diversity need not be an obstacle to democratisation. But the lack of such inclusive politics can bring about long periods of political instability and inter-communal violence. The absence of political will to seriously address the legitimate grievances of ethnic communities can also lead to the failure of political integration, potentially leading to violence. In the Southern Mexican province of Chiapas, the economic marginalisation of a diverse community of indigenous Mexicans through neo-liberal economic policies further disadvantaged the region's indigenous population and caused them to turn to violence. Finding the government unresponsive to their political concerns, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation engaged in armed insurgency, which it considered the only effective means of expressing its political demands, and briefly seized control of several cities in Chiapas. Though the government opened discussions with the rebels, its lack of will to engage in serious dialogue with the insurgents encouraged the persistence of low-intensity conflicts in Mexico's southern state.

Post-Apartheid South Africa, in contrast, successfully transitioned from white minority rule to a multi-party democracy in which the country's numerous ethnic groups were properly represented. Potential barriers to national unity such as Zulu and Afrikaner nationalism were successfully negotiated. In most regions, the country's ethnic composition remains diverse, and provincial identities are civic rather than ethnically based. By the same token, although ethnic diversity is fully recognised, the main source of national

identity is liberal constitutional democracy with majoritarian rule. For example, both as candidate and as president, Jacob Zuma expressed his Zulu identity and ran as an African National Congress (ANC) candidate, but drew political support from across South Africa's ethnic boundaries.

The South African experience also shows how a shared civic identity based on citizenship that transcends ethnic affiliations helps to foster the national unity needed for a successful transition. In post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina, a former communist regime with three major ethno-religious groups, the Bosniak, Croat and Serbian leaderships encouraged mutual distrust among their communities and built a political environment where citizens lacked a shared sense of national identity. To this day, Bosnian politics is largely conducted through the lens of ethno-nationalism. As post-conflict institutional design and political leadership both failed to work towards reconciliation among the communities, Bosnia-Herzegovina still lacks the shared identity and national cohesion needed for democratic consolidation. These examples evidence the importance of identity politics in integrating ethnic and tribal minorities: in South Africa, the shared sense of national identity fostered political reconciliation, while in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Nigeria and Chiapas, its absence created political stalemate.

CONCLUSION

Political transitions are particularly challenging when they involve the reconciliation of different ethnic and tribal traditions and interests. Previous experiences demonstrate that, while it is important to construct civic institutions and structurally integrate minority or tribal populations into the political process, their influence must not undermine civic institutions and identity. For most Arab countries, tribal structures are such an omnipresent part of society that their inclusion in the overall governance system will be necessary if transitions are to be implemented successfully. In Egypt, the Bedouins and Nubians constitute a significant minority of the country's population and occupy strategically important borders with Israel and Sudan. In Libya, regional militias control both territory and resources, so Tripoli must engage the tribes. In Yemen, tribal leaders must be convinced to work for the greater national interest rather than focusing on parochial concerns. Moreover, with significant Berber populations in both Morocco and Algeria, Amazigh aspirations must be reconciled into the larger national concerns. For each country to overcome its transitional challenges, it is essential that transitional authorities actively reach out to tribal and ethnic minorities and show consideration for their interests and concerns. Equally, the rights of ethnic minorities must be solidly anchored in the new legal order. Egypt's continuing effort to draft a new constitution provides such an opportunity. Algeria and Morocco must reach out to Berber communities in broader ways than simply offering linguistic concessions. And both Libya and Yemen must find a way to engage the tribes, neutralise their militias' influence and integrate their partisan ambitions into the wider national dialogues.

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