Dynamics of the Maghreb's Geopolitics in 2014

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27 January 2015
Abstract
A number of elections were held in the Maghreb’s countries in 2014, reflecting the significant, though highly varied, political transformations taking place in the greater region. Tunisia and Libya, for example, continued to experience upheavals and insecurity (albeit of different types), while Morocco is now experimenting with a new kind of politics. Regardless, most of the countries of the Arab Maghreb Union claim to be attempting to lay solid foundations for a transition to democracy. In this context, all five countries in the Union face serious challenges, both internal (such as rampant discord between political players) and external (with regional and global powers relentlessly exerting pressure in an attempt to influence political transformation in the region for their own ends). The situation is made more complex by the fact that many of the political elite who opposed the Arab Spring are gaining more traction, making it possible for political power in some countries to revert back into the hands of the regimes that predated the Arab Spring.

Introduction
In terms of politics and security, the winds of change have taken different paths in each of the five countries of the Arab Maghreb Union (namely, Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia). Tunisia and Morocco’s modes of political change appear to be based more on consensus and partnership, while violent conflict prevails in Libya. Attempts at democratisation seem to be successfully weathering the transitional stage in
some countries, but ongoing political and social stability will depend on whether the issues that gave rise to the earlier conflicts are addressed and managed.

The Arab Maghreb countries went through remarkable political changes in 2014. While their vastly diverse inner workings set the specific course that each one took, all the countries face similar challenges related to security. Algeria remains stuck in a political stalemate over the presidency, which has created a host of internal tensions; Morocco is pressing ahead with an innovative partnership between the Islamists and the royalists; Tunisia is managing to survive its transitional phase, with minimal political costs; Libya has yet to find consensus on a political model that will help resolve its internal conflicts; and the presidential election in Mauritania did nothing more than maintain the status quo.

**Dynamics of political and security upheavals in the region**

While Tunisia and Libya are experiencing profound political transformation, and Morocco is attempting a completely different sort of politics, all three countries are aiming to lay the foundations for democracy in the region. All the countries still face serious internal and external challenges, such as rampant discord among the political players and relentless attempts by regional and global powers to thwart political change in the region and return these countries to their pre-Arab Spring condition. The situation is aggravated by the fact that those who wish to reverse the gains made by revolutionary movements are accumulating traction. A counter-revolutionary reversal and the reinstatement of political regimes that predated the Arab Spring is possible, especially now that significant numbers of Islamists and democrats have withdrawn from the political frontlines.

Internal changes in the countries where the previous regimes were toppled are certainly still being influenced by outside interventions. It can be argued that outsiders are setting the political and security agendas of Libya and, to a lesser extent, in Tunisia. In 2014, Tunisia took decisive steps towards democracy, benefitting from the ability of civil institutions to achieve political consensus. This consensus is forming the basis for steadier and more solidly institutionalised political milieu, although the country is not yet free of economic and security tensions.
The changes that swept the region in 2011 – with their advances, upheavals and reverberations still felt today – contributed greatly to rapid change in the political dynamics of the Maghreb countries and those of their African neighbours. On a security level, the region faces mounting challenges, not least of which is the trade and smuggling of weapons. Arms from Libya – which have been used to supply a number of flashpoints in the area since 2011 – is one of the primary factors responsible for intensifying conflict in the region. As one writer put it, “The perils of arms from Libya are at their most grave; weapons from Libya were used in the events that took place in In Amenas in south-eastern Algeria in early 2013; it has been proven that Libyan guns were also used in politically motivated assassinations in Tunisia’s Jebel Ech Chambi area, where much blood has been spilled”.(1)

**Libya**

Three interrelated dynamics dominated Libya in 2014: armed conflict, foreign intervention, and efforts to encourage dialogue. A year that marked a turning point in terms of security and political developments, 2014 exposed blatant foreign intervention in the Libyan crisis. The prominent role played by retired general Khalifa Haftar, and the foreign forces he represents, added to the chaos both politically and militarily. The year also marked the height of political realignments to date, with military confrontations at their most violent in the Benghazi offensive led by Haftar on 16 May 2014 (code-named Operation Dignity), and during the Fajr Libya (Operation Libyan Dawn), which was launched in July 2014.

These developments produced a highly polarised political environment with two conflicting parties claiming legitimacy. On the one hand, the national general assembly in Tripoli enjoys genuine and legally valid legitimacy; while on the other hand, the parliament in Tobruk enjoys a degree of international recognition. The parliament was elected in June 2014 amid major political conflict between Libya’s major political players, namely, the Islamist-tinted Justice and Construction Party, the al-Wafaa (Loyalty) Bloc, and the liberal Coalition of National Forces.

However, despite achieving some foreign recognition, the parliament has not made much progress so far, for two main reasons. The first is that the West has no coherent solution to the Libyan crisis, and nor do the various Arab countries that are attempting to intervene in Libya. This is evident from the fact that even some of Libya’s neighbours (such as Algeria), which have much to gain from peace in Libya, have made it clear that
they have no intention of getting involved. The second reason is the sheer size of the military forces on the ground. The Libyan rebels and those participating in Fajr Libya are heavily armed and both sides are hoping for a military victory. While this remains true, the search for a real political solution is bound to be sidelined.

One of the most significant developments in 2014 was that oil began to feature strongly in the conflict. The warring parties tried to take control of the oil-producing regions. Clashes with the militias that control the ports, led by Ibrahim Jadhran, hampered oil exports for a time. Jadhran seems to be the odd one out in the conflict. Given his alignment with Haftar, his confrontations with the National General Assembly (and the rebels in general) seem counterintuitive. However, Jadhran has scores to settle with Haftar that might resurface when the armed conflict ends.

After UN special representative Tarek Mitri failed to bring the country’s political parties to the table, another UN special representative, Bernardino Leon, tried again. Talks began on 29 September 2014 in Ghadames, an oasis town on Libya’s north-western border with Algeria. The dialogue began poorly. The participants did not truly represent the major parties – be they the armed militants, social groupings or political organisations. The agenda set out some run-of-the-mill options for ending the crisis, but they were rendered toothless by the fact that any political course of action remains highly dependent on the armed conflict’s outcomes. Who controls what in terms of land and oil looks poised to set the course for the crisis in the weeks and months to come.

On the other hand, the strengthening of the Islamic State (IS or Daesh) in 2014 was another important development that is likely to have a considerable impact on Libya and the Maghreb region. For example, in the eastern Libyan city of Darnah, Daesh established relationships with jihadi groups, such as the Shura Council for Islamic Youth. This organisation includes members of the Ansar al-Sharia militia, and is made up of combatants who have returned from fighting in Syria, Mali and Algeria. The Shura Council aligns itself ideologically and operationally with IS,(2) which, given the rampant chaos in Libya, means that Darnah could become a hub from which IS could spread into North Africa.

IS has already shown its determination to develop a presence in North Africa and Egypt by inviting some of its most prominent leaders to a meeting in Darnah, including
Saifullah bin Hussein (also known as Abu Ayad) who is Ansar al-Sharia’s leader in Tunisia; Algeria’s Mokhtar Balmokhtar; and a Yemeni leader known as Abu Hanifa al-Yamani. Darnah was the first place to host an IS meeting outside of Iraq and Syria, and it took place after Ansar al-Sharia leaders in Libya and Tunisia had declared their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.(3)

**Tunisia**
While Libya struggles through its transition, 2014 proved a pivotal year for Tunisian politics, with the relative success of its presidential elections marking the end of the country’s transition to democracy. In 2014, Tunisia witnessed four key political milestones. The first was the recognition of Mehdi Jomaa’s government, which provided a way out of the crisis caused by the process used to form previous governments. The second was reaching consensus on the new constitution, ratified by the country’s political players in January 2014. The third was parliamentary elections held in October 2014, which practically redrew the political map because new political parties and players emerged. The fourth was the presidential election held in December 2014, which ratified and affirmed the legitimacy of the three previous processes.

The popularity of Ennahda, the moderate Islamist political party that ran Tunisia from October 2011 to early 2014, has declined significantly. Pragmatically, the party stepped down early 2014 to make way for the constitutional development process and declared themselves to be politically impartial in relation to the final stages of the country’s political transformation. By doing this, Ennahda represents a new model of Islamist political behaviour at a time of great regional and international insecurity. The organisation now occupies something of an Islamist middle ground politically. Furthermore, their decision not to contest the presidential elections, given the seats they won in the parliamentary elections, forced them to think of ways to remain within the circle of power, and to protect themselves from being excluded or gradually edged out of key spheres of influence.

On the other hand, the elections held in 2014, in both Tunisia and in Libya, shattered the long-held illusion that Islamists would be unbeatable in any election in this region. In fact, the Islamists came in second in Tunisia’s elections and in Libya’s parliamentary elections held in June 2014. Tunisia’s election result might ease some of the national and international pressure on other Islamist parties in future, and allow them to quietly reposition themselves.
If anything, Tunisia’s presidential elections confirmed the trend that the parliamentary elections had made clear: the balance of power in that country has resettled after years of upheaval. The outcomes of both sets of elections were met with relief by international players who had been concerned about where things were going in the region. Ennahda’s Islamist supporters showed no signs of consternation over the outcomes of the political process. Thus, it could be argued that Tunisia has proven to be the exception rather than the rule, beating the odds to build a political system that enjoys a high degree of support.

Tunisia could be viewed as less of an exception, however, if the political groups that took the reins of power after the recent elections are considered, because they included many who had been part of the previous Ben Ali regime, and now achieved power through the electoral process. The Nidaa Tounes Party won the elections and now faces some serious challenges. As it prepares for its first convention, the party will have to ensure coherence and solidarity among its leaders as they gather the spoils won in the electoral battle and prepare to form a government. In addition, with Beji Caid Essebsi as president, the position of party leader will have to be filled. In this past (such as when Moncef Marzouki, became president) this situation created rifts in the party, and party members will have to take care to ensure that this situation does not recur. However, judging by the general outcomes of the electoral process, it seems unlikely that ideological polarisation will be as intense as it was earlier. Some of the main ideologues no longer hold power, and the politicians representing different ideologies are no longer in direct contact. Nevertheless, Tunisia’s new leaders are poised to inherit the same serious security challenges that face the region more generally. In terms of international allies, the visit by King Mohammed VI showed Morocco’s support for Tunisia’s transitional process.

**Morocco**

Morocco can be considered an anomaly among monarchies as it has adopted a balanced policy in its relationships with those who supported Arab Spring and those who opposed the uprisings. Morocco seems very careful in its relationship with its traditional allies, who have reservations about the role of Islamists in Morocco’s corridors of power, especially regarding their social policies which seem to be designed in a way that will help them further entrench themselves in the country’s politics, and their advances in normalising their relationship with government institutions.
Morocco’s rulers showed no signs of being persuaded by the policies of its usual allies towards the sweeping changes in the region. King Mohammed VI’s visit to Tunisia in mid-2014 can be seen as evidence of the monarchy’s openness towards countries going through political transition. Similarly, openness to countries with slightly more Islamist political leanings was shown by King Mohammed’s visit to Turkey in December 2014, which curiously occurred immediately after his visit to the United Arab Emirates.

While Islamist groupings face major internal and external challenges in Libya, are weak in Algeria and Mauritania, and are growing more marginal in Tunisia, Morocco’s Islamists have managed to maintain a relatively strong presence in the country’s corridors of power. Leaders of the Islamist Justice and Development Party successfully continued their relationship with the state, and managed to formalise their relations with the monarchy and with other forces in the country. This strategy has been vital in sustaining the party since 2011, and can be considered a significant achievement given that the monarchy has a long history and extensive political experience, and could well have been expected to outmanoeuvre the Islamists.

The late Abdullah Baha, a former leader in the Justice and Development Party, reportedly described the Moroccan political scene as a slightly peculiar political phenomenon: “There are those who support [the royal establishment] but not reforms, and there are those who support reform but not [the royal establishment.]”. This is a rather apt description for a complex situation in which stakeholders search for both stability and reform, while trying to achieve consensus around change.

Although some of the country’s powerful conservatives have attempted to thwart the Islamists’ partnership with the monarchy, they were prevented from doing so by two factors. The first is the Islamists’ political resilience and their ability to absorb and contain a range of political views and actors; the second is the monarchy’s own desire to maintain its position by ensuring political and social balance in the kingdom.

**Algeria**

While stuck in a political impasse, Algeria went through two key milestones in 2014, both of which failed to deliver the necessary political environment for the much-needed change of power.
The first milestone was the “re-election” of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to his fourth term in office on 17 April 2014. Bouteflika’s failing health has made it difficult for him to occupy his office, and this has brought to light real difficulties involved in managing political change in Algeria. The major political players, including the military, intelligence community, and others, failed to reach consensus on a successor to Bouteflika, much less consensus on how the post-Bouteflika era should be managed. Meanwhile, the opposition parties were also too weak and divided to put up any credible candidates. Thus, there seems to be little room for change in Algeria’s political power structure, which continues to rely heavily on the security forces and official bureaucracy. For now, the future of Algeria’s politics seems to depend on the decisions of the ruling clique.

The second milestone was that political consultations on the issue of constitutional change began in June 2014. Led by Ahmed Ouyahia and others from the political elite, including those affiliated with the Islamic Salvation Front, the consultations began after the presidency announced various constitutional amendments that would buttress the regime, giving it added powers in terms of maintaining political and social stability. This is most evident in its quest to pass an amendment that would create a position of vice president, an idea that France backs as a guarantee to Algeria’s stability.

While the constitutional amendments are expected to be legislated in the first quarter of 2015, the way in which the consultations were handled led to a split among the political elite, with some (such as the Coordination for Liberties and Democratic Transition, a movement that encompasses several parties with different affiliations) opting to boycott the process. The movement then organised a meeting in June 2014, which brought national figures and various opposition parties together to express their rejection of the consultation process.

**Mauritania**

Elections dominated the 2014 political scene in Mauritania as well, but Mauritania is still ruled by a politico-military complex, with political organisations unable to prevail over the military. The country’s electoral legitimacy appears to have weakened irreparably. If held at all, elections are merely a show, keeping up appearances and greasing the political tracks of the existing regime. Thus, and not surprisingly, the 2014 elections reinstated Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz as president in a simple continuation of the status quo since he seized power in a 2008 coup.
The regime all but blew the opposition to pieces, and the latter’s decision to boycott the elections did little to faze the regime. The opposition now seems to be split down the middle. Despite initially forming a co-ordinating committee to run against Ould Abdel Aziz, the political parties that make up the National Forum for Democracy and Unity are deeply split over how to respond to the regime’s call for dialogue.(4)

Comprising political parties, representatives of labour confederations, civil institutions, and independent individuals, the Forum is in some disarray. Its co-ordinating committee disbanded in late 2013 when one of its member organisations, the Islamist Tawasul Party, decided to contest the municipal and parliamentary elections, contravening the position arrived at by other members of the Forum. Thus, significant swathes of the opposition movement found themselves not only excluded from the national electoral process, but rejected by their own supporters.

Generally speaking, the regime has left the Islamists be in 2014, but the Islamists’ participation in the elections exposed them to some pressure from the regime when al-Mustaqbal Institute, the Islamists’ most important dawah institution, headed by Muhammad Ould El-Dedo, was shut down by the state.

Meanwhile, a politically significant shift in structure of Mauritania’s military establishment took place in 2014. Divided into an army, a navy and an air force, the military falls under the leadership of a major general, and was split into several branches and legions. This seems to be a tactic to disband the fiefdoms that dominate the various military apparatuses. By making the number of senior officers disproportionately large, the regime seems to be attempting to thwart any chance of a military clique gaining enough coherence to pose a threat to the state in the future.

The geopolitical perimeter: defining the region’s security priorities
The countries of the Arab Maghreb are directly influenced by the major security issues in their region. These include the strife in Mali and in Western Sahara, not to mention the dangerously chaotic situation in Libya. The as-yet-unresolved conflict over Western Sahara notwithstanding, political viewpoints on the security issues of the region remain
highly diverse. Just one example is the vast rift between France and Algeria on how to resolve issues in Libya and Mali.

Foreign intervention in Libya seemed imminent in 2014, as France attempted to lay out a framework for intervention similar to its involvement in Mali.\(^{(5)}\) Italy took a similar stance on the need for intervention, differing only by proposing that a UN umbrella body move into Libya.\(^{(6)}\)

Among the Arab states, Egypt, which shares a long border with Libya, made no secret of its direct interests in its neighbour's internal conflicts. It seems that Cairo’s vision of its own national security, as this pertains to the threat posed by Libya’s internal situation, is based on three main issues that have caused concern in the Egyptian capital for some time. These are the Islamists, oil, and the free flow of weapons in the region. Any involvement by Egypt in Libya would have complex ramifications as Libya’s security and political issues have North African, sub-Saharan African and Mediterranean dimensions.

While Cairo used to have political allies in Libya (as evidenced by the former Libyan prime minister Ali Zeidan’s meetings with Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in 2014, and Zeidan’s successor Abdullah al-Thani’s visit to Cairo in October 2014), Egypt no longer has such allies – the Libyan politicians who followed Cairo’s line have disappeared from the limelight.

Other key countries in the region have refused to get directly involved in the Libyan conflict. Algeria and Tunisia are involved in an initiative to promote dialogue among warring Libyan factions, which makes it difficult for them to get involved militarily. France unsuccessfully attempted to create a coalition among Libya’s neighbours, with the aim of moving into the southern parts of Libya and attempting to contain the situation there. Niger, and some Libyan factions including al-Thani, welcomed this idea, but so far, Libya’s security and political future seem to depend on the likelihood of foreign intervention, or on overcoming the stalemate via dialogue.

With signs of Daesh’s presence in Libya growing stronger, foreign intervention by countries other than France may become more likely. On 27 November 2014, the Algerian daily El-Khabar quoted unnamed security sources who said that Algeria had received a request from the US to provide assistance to an international coalition against
12

IS. The sources claimed that this coalition is planning an offensive against IS should it gain more influence in Libya.(7)

Security challenges in the Maghreb continue to produce various political formations, usually formed for specific purposes. In 2014, a new bloc emerged that excluded Algeria and Morocco, the Maghreb’s two biggest players. Thus, the leaders of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad announced the formation of the Sahel Quintet, or the Group of Five [Atlantic] Coast States. The Quintet’s agenda naturally includes security, given that jihadi groups have found havens in southern Libya, northern Chad, Niger, and eastern Mali, and that these are all countries that have also allegedly become corridors for human and drug trafficking into Europe.

Meanwhile, the polarisation between Algeria and Morocco remains as strong as ever. Although this has long affected less influential countries such as Mauritania, it has now also spread to Tunisia, which is caught between the geographically adjacent Algeria – with its flashpoint borders – and the more distant Morocco, which is attempting to lure Tunisia into its sphere of influence.

**Conclusion**

To summarise, this is how the scene is set in the Arab Maghreb for 2015: political and security upheavals in Libya; a political stalemate in Algeria; Tunisia achieving milestones in its transition to democracy; an alliance between Islamists and royalty in Morocco; soldiers dressing up as democrats in Mauritania; and complex security issues across the region that make foreign intervention seem inevitable.

Contrary to the hopes and aspirations of many, democracy and elections have either brought pre-Arab Spring politicians back into power or helped them stay in office. Libya and Mauritania remain highly vulnerable to security crises, and the entire region has yet to come to grips with the causes of the rampant chaos that continues to wreak havoc on so many people’s lives.

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References


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