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*The mirage of stability:
North Africa after the pandemic*

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The COVID-19 potentially represents a watershed moment in contemporary history, uniting Global North and Global South in the multi-faceted challenge of the pandemic, which is causing havoc and raises doubts on the ruling neo-liberal model. The reinforcement of the state's powers and the shrinking space for civil liberties and political rights are without any doubt two of the major consequences resulting from the spread of the pandemic. It is naïve to think that lockdown measures do not carry the risk of a monumental shift in the relations between the authorities and the public, especially in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

States here are at particularly high-risk, due to the prevailing authoritarian model, economic constraints and popular pressure. With a few considerable exceptions such as Tunisia, authoritarianism in North Africa has prevailed ever since the end of the Arab Spring, when ruling elites (or historic blocs) threatened by a paradigmatic shift in the balance of power have been successful in presenting their fight for survival as an inescapable trade-off between security and democracy.

It is expected that the pandemic would reinforce this authoritarian trend, replicating this simplistic binary system to offer a choice between public health and rule of law, contributing to the preservation of the post-Arab Spring regional (dis) order. However, it is highly likely that the performance of delegitimised and discredited institutions in dealing with COVID-19 would come under increasing scrutiny by a disenfranchised population. Paradoxically, this could lead to a new wave of protests and demonstrations, considering the most recent precedents of 2019 in Algeria and, in part, Egypt, and the economic shock expected in the months and years to come.

An unexpected opportunity to consolidate faltering regimes

In order to understand the apparent paradox between strengthening authoritarian trends on one side and exploding social tensions on the other, it is important to adopt a dynamic approach, distinguishing between short-term consequences of the pandemic and the long-term effects that it would entail. In the short term, measures such as lockdowns, curfews, travel restrictions are part of a

package aimed at flattening the curve and reduce the impact of COVID-19 on health services often underfunded and unable to cope with the rising number of inpatients.

However, it must be noted that these measures would have a huge impact on segments of the population unable to work remotely and adopt social distancing measures already introduced in western states. Unemployment rate is expected to increase as a result, especially in the informal sector, particularly relevant in most MENA economies. There are also humanitarian implications regarding the large number of IDPs in conflict zones, as well as migrants, refugees and asylum seekers held in overcrowded detention centres.

Governments have adopted measures to relieve the burden, such as the release of detainees from prisons, but it must be highlighted that in the large majority of the cases political prisoners have been excluded from this decision. As thousands of detainees sentenced for common crimes are released from prisons, activists of the Rif region in Morocco, journalists and protesters in Algeria and political prisoners in Egypt are still held in detention.

While aimed at protecting and preserving the public health services, such measures also fall in line with the governments' agenda to reduce internal threats and consolidate their powers. In this context, Algeria can be considered the most illustrative case of how authorities are using the pandemic to defuse tensions after months of protests and unrest, cracking down on demonstrators and curtailing press freedom. The wave of arrests has continued and also intensified even after the spread of the pandemic, with President Abdelmajid Tebboune explicitly saying that the restriction of civil liberties, albeit temporarily, is a distinct possibility in order to preserve the public health¹.

Recent sentences against members of the Hirak opposition movement such as the journalists Kahled Drareni, activist Karim Tabbou and the opposition leader Abdelhouab Fersaoui pushed many

¹ Hamid Ould Ahmed, [Algeria bans street marches due to virus; some protesters unswayed](#), 18 March 2020, Reuters.

observers to suggest that authorities are taking advantage of the pandemic to increase repression². This is in stark contrast with the decision of the Hirak leaders to suspend weekly protests against the regime for public health reasons. Moreover, access to several news websites (including Inter-Lignes, Maghreb Emergent and Radio FM) has been repeatedly blocked³. This has exacerbated the public confidence in the state, already undermined after one year of protests.

External and internal factors fuelling instability

From an international perspective, inroads made by third parties such as China are another visible trend. Beijing is sending in medical teams, ventilators and personal protective equipment (PPE), offering to build two hospitals in Algeria and Tunisia, as part of a mask diplomacy aimed at increasing China's soft power in the region⁴. The effects of this powerful propaganda machine, to which even western states like Italy traditionally anchored to the US hegemony have been apparently unable to resist, would inevitably lead to a buy-in from states looking for alternatives following Washington's gradual withdrawal from the region.

The expanding influence of Beijing is designed to move along the publicised routes (such as the Belt and Road Initiative), with North Africa representing a soft underbelly for power projections from international powers such as Russia or regional players like Turkey, as seen during the most recent developments in the Libyan conflict.

Nevertheless, with the considerable exception of Libya, whose conflict deserves a specific focus for its relative indifference to the COVID-19, instability in North Africa is likely to be fuelled more by internal factors rather than third parties' geopolitical ambitions. The larger and in some cases authoritarian role of the state entail questions about the shifting political paradigm and the economic

² Dalia Ghanem, [The disease of repression](#), 8 April 2020, Carnegie Endowment.

³ [Le site d'information Interlignes bloqué en Algérie](#), 21 April 2020, Radio France Internationale.

⁴ Umberto Profazio, [Medical diplomacy displays China's increasing soft power in the Maghreb](#), Maghreb Strategic Trend, April 2020, NATO Defense College Foundation.

sustainability of the institutions' effort. The correlation between the pandemic and the state of emergency is expected to end once the coronavirus is out of the picture, but it remains to be seen if the state would voluntarily relinquish additional powers occasionally seized during the pandemic and return to normalcy in a solid constitutional framework.

In this context, the approach taken by Tunisia is noteworthy. Activating article 70 of the Constitution, on 4 April the parliament voted to give special powers to the government to face the pandemic. The government led by Elyes Fakhfakh is now able to legislate by decree, but only for two months and on matters specifically designated by the parliament itself⁵. The constitutional procedure followed, and the limitations of the government's additional powers are an extraordinary exception for the region's standards.

A looming severe economic recession

However, even Tunisia will not be spared by the economic shock lying ahead. In March the government announced a US\$850 million plan to face the pandemic, including a US\$155 aid to disadvantaged families, tax relief and delayed repayments on loans⁶. Financial resources provided by international partners such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s Rapid Finance Instrument, which has agreed a US\$400 million loan; and the Islamic Developments Bank (IDB), which has agreed to a US\$280 million loan, come with strings attached and are conditioned to reforms, already delayed following the US\$2.8 billion loan from the IMF in 2016. The economic downturn due to the crisis affecting the tourist sector following a spate of terrorist attacks in 2015-2016 and the opposition of significant internal stakeholder such as trade unions have played a relevant role in delaying reforms in Tunisia, but it is difficult to imagine a postponement this time around.

⁵ Frida Dahmani, [Coronavirus en Tunisie: l'Assemblée accorde de nouvelles prérogatives au chef du gouvernement](#), 5 April 2020, Jeune Afrique.

⁶ Lilia Blaise, [En Tunisie, l'économie informelle mise à mal par le coronavirus](#), 27 March 2020, Le Monde Afrique.

Increasing dependency from international lenders involves austerity measures aimed at adjusting macroeconomic policies. These would be met with significant opposition by a population already suffering from an increasing unemployment rate and the expected recession, further aggravated in oil producing countries by plummeting prices affecting many OPEC members in the region.

On the other hand, resisting the temptation of resorting to external debt could further diminish the state's ability to navigate the economic turmoil in the aftermath of the pandemic. Algeria, which since the 90s has always been reluctant to negotiate loans with international organisations, has seen his foreign exchange reserves eroding constantly in the past few months going below the US\$62 billion⁷. The incoming recession due to the COVID-19 and the oil slump would further stress in a formidable way the economic capacity of the country.

A never-ending state of emergency

As a result, social tensions are likely to increase in the long run, especially if the (mis) management of the pandemic by the institutions is judged inappropriate. An incredibly high death toll, efforts to conceal the real dimension of the pandemic and inefficiency of the welfare programs for the disadvantaged segments of the population are some of the factors that can fuel another wave of mass protest, following 2011 and 2019.

A new face off between protesters and authoritarian regime is highly likely, and demonstrations would be met with a militarisation of the public sphere, already in place in different countries, as highlighted by the frequent deployment of militaries to maintain public order and assist in the fight against COVID-19 not only in the region, but worldwide.

⁷ Yasmina Allouche, [The coronavirus crisis isn't creating new problems for Algeria – it's exacerbating long-ignored ones](#), 4 April 2020, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy.

As pointed out by Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen in a recent interview⁸, many states have used coronavirus as an instrument to impose a state of emergency according to a model that started in 2001 and that aims at imposing a regime that crackdown on protests and militarise the public sphere. The fight against terrorism, the economic crisis of 2007-2008 and the most recent migrant crisis have been instrumental in consolidating this model in subsequent waves and the most recent remarks by some western leaders describing the fight against the epidemic as a war are useful examples of this narrative. This global trend would not spare the North Africa, where threats to the authoritarian stability already emerged in this decade would be further magnified by external shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic.



⁸ Marc Tibaldi, [Rasmusses, fenomenologia del tardo fascismo](#), 16 April 2020, Il Manifesto.



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