The influence of diffusing protest on perceptions amongst authoritarian regime elites during critical junctures.

Investigating the conditions of transnational authoritarian learning in Morocco and Egypt during the Arab Uprisings in 2011.

Keywords
Arab uprisings, diffusion, authoritarian learning, resilience, contestation, political elites

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Abstract

Authoritarian regimes under pressure can draw upon different strategies to respond to a challenge. Naturally, the magnitude of the threat to their authority and the type of the challenger influence the regime’s response (Josua and Edel 2014, 6–7; Franklin 2009; Davenport 2007). Furthermore, the regime type, traditional response patterns and the resources the dictator can deploy to contain contestation influence the response strategy (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014; Svolik 2012; Barany 2013). However, the actions of authoritarian regimes under pressure cannot be looked at from a purely domestic perspective as they are also embedded in a regional and international context that influences regime decision-making as well as waves of contestation (Della Porta 2014; Hale 2013).

Theoretically the paper engages with the emerging literature on Authoritarian Learning and proposes an analytical framework that takes varying natures of threat perceptions and differing domestic decision-making structures into account.

Building on semi-structured interviews with political elites in Egypt and Morocco I develop an actor account based approach to assess the effects of transnational learning on authoritarian elite decision-making during critical junctures (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Soifer 2012). Based on more than 50 elite interviews with government officials (former and current), party leaders, political consultants, journalists and academics in Morocco and Egypt the gathered data allows an insight into how the regime elite’s perceptions are influenced by what they observe abroad and how this influenced the domestic decision-making process in 2011.
1. Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the evolving debate on international influences on authoritarian politics (Weyland 2010; 2014; 2016; Ambrosio 2010; Levitsky and Way 2010; Heydemann and Leenders 2011; Vanderhill 2012; Erdmann et al. 2013; Brownlee 2012; Koesel and Bunce 2013; Tansey 2016b; 2016a). It is rather an endeavor of theory development than an exercise in testing concrete hypothesis. However the at this stage still incomplete case studies will –at a later stage– incorporate a more sophisticated methodological approach to the study of international dimension of authoritarian politics based on original account evidence and an interpretive empirical account of elite perceptions and the impact of diffusing protests on regime decision making during critical junctures.

After introducing the main conceptual building blocks, I explore aim to identify the most relevant conditions for transnational authoritarian learning to have a significant effect on decision-making processes in authoritarian regimes during regional upheavals. Empirically, I illustrate the varying conditions and subsequent effects of transnational learning on the perceptions of political elites in the context of the Arab Uprisings in 2011 in Morocco and Egypt. Methodologically, this analysis rests on account evidence in form of elite interviews, conducted in Morocco and Egypt between 2012-2016. Based upon these interviews, the available literature and other primary sources (such as speeches and official documents) the paper gives an account of the perceptions of regime elites and allows an insight into the often opaque decision-making processes of regime elites during the critical juncture marked by diffusing contention throughout the region in 2011. I conclude with some implications for further research arguing for less rational choice based and structural explanations but more actor based and mechanism based approaches to overcome the shortcomings of previous attempts to incorporate external influences into explanations of authoritarian politics and strengthen the link between external influences and domestic regime elite decision-making under pressure.

Authoritarian regimes under pressure can resort to different strategies. Presuming rational actors, the incumbents’ goal is assumed to be ensuring their survival at the top of the food chain. Naturally, any regime response depends on the mag-
nitude of the threat to its authority and the nature of the challenger (Josua and Edel 2014, 6–7; Franklin 2009; Davenport 2007). Furthermore, the regime type and the resources the dictator can deploy to contain contestation influence the response strategy (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014; Svolik 2012; Barany 2013).

I argue that in critical junctures (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Soifer 2012) arising in the context of regionally diffusing political contestation (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2006), authoritarian learning (Heydemann and Leenders 2011; 2014; Vanderhill 2012; Diamond 2005; Dobson 2013) can have a crucial impact on the calculations of authoritarian regimes under threat.

2. The international context: Blind spot of authoritarianism research

Works on authoritarian regimes have been firmly nested between the comparative tradition of regime-related research and the study of democratization within political science. Studies on authoritarian politics, mainly inspired by behaviouralist and institutionalist approaches, have dominated the scholarly discourse on the prevalence of authoritarian politics (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gandhi 2008; Levitsky and Way 2010; Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010; Svolik 2012; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2013).1

From the literature on authoritarianism, one may identify three larger dimensions that are expected to have an impact on authoritarian regimes and their stability (Gerschewski 2013; Merkel et al. 2013). Repression, which may either take the form of violation of physical integrity (hard repression) or means that restrict political rights and liberties (soft repression) are both part of the standard repertoire of autocrats (Davenport 2007; Davenport and Inman 2012). Second, cooptation of relevant elites and potential challengers through formal legislative institutions has been proven to have a significant impact on authoritarian regime resilience (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Magaloni 2008; Boix and Svolik 2013; Svolik 2012; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014). At the same time other works have shown how informal patronage networks and allegiances can also contribute to foster regime resilience in authoritarian contexts (Arriola 2009;

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1 They have also been applied to explaining the recent developments in the Arab World (Barany 2011; Barany 2013; Bormann, Cederman, and Vogt 2013; Volpi 2013; Yom and Gause 2012)
Lindemann 2011). Thirdly, legitimacy through diffused (input) or specific support (output) has an impact upon the foundations of authoritarian rule (Gerschewski 2013; Merkel et al. 2013; Burnell 2006; Gilley 2008; Schlumberger 2010). However most analysis focusing on either of the above-mentioned factors and their effects on authoritarian regime resilience, solely rely on an assessment of the domestic conditions in authoritarian regimes.

I argue in this paper that in the context of the 2011 Arab Uprisings a purely domestically-bound perspective is not sufficient for explaining the decision-making within the effected authoritarian regimes (Volpi 2013; Heydemann and Leenders 2014; Ambrosio 2010; Brownlee 2012; Weyland 2014; 2016; Tansey 2016b). A purely domestic perspective cannot account for crucial changes in the perceptions of regime elites that altered the basis of how incumbent regimes assessed their options and decided when and how to react to emerging protests (Bank, Richter, Sunik 2013; Erdmann et al. 2013; Bellin 2004, 144).

Although there seems to be a consensus on the importance of external effects on authoritarian regimes most works neglect inter- and transnational influences on domestic conditions of regime stability (Bellin 2012, 144; Erdmann et al. 2013; Gleditsch 2012). As Erdmann and colleagues point out “The literature on the international dimension of authoritarian rule is highly fragmented and only loosely connected to previously developed concepts of democratization and diffusion.” (Erdmann et al. 2013, 9).

The international environment influences and shapes the perceptions of incumbent regime elites and thus has effects on how they react facing protests in their own backyard (Kurt Weyland 2016, 216). The calculations and strategic choices of authoritarian regimes under pressure are embedded in a regional and international context that can have decisive impacts on an incumbent regime’s response to growing contestation (Della Porta 2014; Hale 2013).

However most of the recent literature trying to integrate external effects upon authoritarian regimes focuses on the foreign policies in China and Putin’s Russia or other regional powers (Erdmann et al. 2013, 5; Koesel and Bunce 2013; Babayan 2015; Isaac 2014; Tansey 2016a, 141–142). Such works often rooted in the field of international relations focus solely on intentionally pursued foreign
policy by regional powers or strong authoritarian states vis-à-vis fellow autocrats or transitional regimes. These works thus attest a lot of agency to the so-called “black knights” (Chou 2016; Tolstrup 2015; Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010; Burnell and Schlumberger 2010; Tansey 2016a): Regional powers and their intention to prevent transformations towards democracy in their sphere of influence in order to avoid spillover effects and internal pressures. While works touch upon important questions of interference and the diffusion and alleged promotion of alternatives to the Western liberal democratic model they remain focussed on the intentional influence of outsiders. Investigating such external interference primarily geared towards either supporting proxy regimes or transition countries in order to support their transformation to democracy have a long tradition in international relations and studies of transition.

Much less attention has been given to external influences that change the calculus of authoritarian regimes without targeted involvement of external powers. Treating domestic regime elites passively does not account for the various ways in which external factors can effect regime calculations and practices (Weyland 2016, 217). As external developments in other countries can also influence the perceptions of regime elites and through that influence their own calculations simply based on observation.

3. Beyond the stability-breakdown paradigm: The importance of actors for decision-making in authoritarian regimes during critical junctures

Contrary to many studies in the field of authoritarianism I am not predominantly interested in regime stability or survival. Starting from a more explorative departure point the primary goal of this research is to detect conditions for transnational learning processes in authoritarian regime elites. I aim to explore under what conditions elite perceptions and calculations change during episodes of political contestation. Critical junctures, such as the Arab Uprisings, the 1848 revolutions in Europe or the diffusion of protests that instigated the fall of the Berlin wall and dissolution of the soviet bloc, provide situations in which high levels of contention make external influences more visible and thus become tangible for the actors as well as for the observer. Political contestation of the incumbents
authority thus constitutes a scope condition for the analysis developed in this paper. In the following paragraphs I will briefly outline the main conceptual building blocs relevant for this paper and relate them to the literature and the object of authoritarian regimes under vertical pressure.

Critical Junctures

I turn to the concept of critical junctures (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Soifer 2012) in order to adapt for the extraordinary circumstances for decision-making in Cairo and Rabat during spring 2011 that were marked by a high uncertainty and accelerated decision-making practices based on incomplete information. Such conditions naturally amplify the importance of actors in decision making processes and allow for tracing regime elite perceptions and how they shaped regime response geared to persevere the status quo due to a limited analytical time frame.²

Critical junctures describe those seldom moments in political life that mark the end of stable periods and open possibilities for significant institutional change reconfiguring the balance of power and thereby reshaping the patterns of political interaction for the following years (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 348; Hogan 2006; Soifer 2012, 1574–1576; Merkel and Gerschewski 2012). In contexts of authoritarian regimes under pressure, critical junctures mark the crossroads that decide the faith of an incumbent authoritarian regime (Merkel and Gerschewski 2012).

In this paper, which focuses on vertical regime challenges, such episodes emerge out of disruptive and exceptional political contestation from below (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2006) in which the existing political order is fundamentally challenged. Such situations bear the possibility of eroding existing structures of authority through one or more challengers and are characterized by struggle of various actors to influence the reconfiguration of power in their favor, thus creating a situation of increased political uncertainty (Tilly and Tarrow 2006; Tarrow 2015). The endpoint of a critical juncture, irrespective of

² As have other analysis of regime reactions to the popular uprisings in 2011 (Slater 2010; Lynch 2014; Heydemann 2013)
its outcome (revolution or mere adaptation and reconfiguration) is defined through a new stable equilibrium of authority (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 358). During critical junctures we thus assume that actors are empowered and structural or institutional constraints –though not irrelevant– can be reshaped and are hence less effective in shaping the behavior and strategic choices of relevant actors. This brings us to the relevant actors for this study that the net paragraphs will briefly introduce.

**Political Elites**

Turning away from predominantly structural analysis of transition processes of the Arab Uprisings and beyond I follow Ahmed and Capoccia’s (2014, 9) approaches “focus[ing] on the strategic interaction of key actors in fighting over institutional innovations”. This opens the possibility to investigate the strategies and interaction of crucial actors –in this case the regime elites– in the context of a critical juncture (Asseburg and Wimmen 2016, 5).

As this paper investigates if and how transnational learning within regime elites manifests and influences the strategic response of incumbent authoritarian regimes during a critical juncture that arises in the context of regionally diffusing protests, the most relevant group of actors are individuals from the political elite that can be considered close to the respective incumbent regimes.

Formal positions in certain organizations or institutions are the most obvious indicator of belonging to this group. However there are also individuals not in formal positions that wield important influence on decision making processes and preference formation within authoritarian regimes, e.g. members of the family or tribe of a high ranking official, business elites, media moguls or opinion-makers, that are oftentimes left out of studies investigating regime behavior or perceptions (Asseburg and Wimmen 2016, 5–6).

Starting from this broader multi-layered and multi-sectoral understanding of political elites I identified relevant actors and organizations based on the case literatures and exchange with experts as well as members of the political elite themselves aimed at talking to elites from relevant sectors as illustrated in the case studies.
Bounded rationality and uncertainty

Reflecting on the role of diffusion during the Arab Uprisings Della Porta and Tarrow as well as Heydemann and Leenders arrive at the conclusion that learning mechanisms constitute the most important type of diffusion among authoritarian regimes (Heydemann and Leenders 2011, 649; Della Porta and Tarrow 2011, 140). Assuming that regime elites rely their strategic calculations facing mass mobilization on an assessment based on their own perceptions, events in neighboring countries may have an impact upon these and thus alter the choices incumbent regimes facing protest make. However, during critical junctures regime elites have to take decisions quickly and under incomplete information as events often unfold within hours or days. Rational decision making resting on a well-informed assessments, as sometimes explicitly but oftentimes also implicitly assumed by recent approaches to the study of so-called authoritarian learning (Heydemann and Leenders 2011; 2014; Vanderhill 2012; Bank and Edel 2015) might thus over rationalize choices by regime elites under pressure.

As Kurt Weyland has shown in his encompassing and compelling historical accounts of various phases of political contention for self-rule (Weyland 2007; 2005; 2010; 2014) the rationality of actors in critical junctures not excluding elites is bounded. The calculations and thus the strategic choices actors make are bounded by (1) their individual assessment of any given situation and (2) the procedures and institutions that structure the political decision making processes (Weyland 2014, 48–49). The rapid speed with which the protests across the Middle East and North Africa spread during 2011 have made well-informed decision making by all actors involved even more unlikely. Hasty choices within the authoritarian elites, facing increasing pressure from mass mobilization can be assumed to have been especially common amongst the regimes first hit by the protests.

Taking the micro level foundations of political decision making seriously, I seek out to grasp the rational of decision makers in Egypt and Morocco and the impact of the events in the neighborhood on their assessment of the situation during the respective critical junctures in both countries during 2011. Through talking to parts of the relevant political elites in both countries about their assessment of
the unfolding events in the neighboring countries at the time allows a first insight into how these elites made sense of the events unfolding around them. This enables us to extract in how far the events in other countries influenced domestic decision making through changing their perceptions through drawing analogies.

4. Linking the external to the domestic: Elite perceptions, transnational authoritarian learning and regime decision-making

In order to develop a framework that makes it possible to link elite perceptions of developments in neighboring countries to their preferences when it comes to taking measures against dissent at home I will rely on elite perceptions and their understanding of events around them. Elite perceptions crucially influence decision-making processes in authoritarian regimes, were closed circles of few influential individuals and groups can influence policy decisions in times of crisis or emerging challenges (Kurt Weyland 2014, 13). How authoritarian elites classify the events unfolding in other countries around them impacts their perceptions and thus the measures they undertake domestically.

With regards to the Arab Uprisings, Heydemann and Leenders (2014) observe an equivalence of the learning processes between protesters and their incumbent regime counterparts:

“Just as the spread of protests was itself the product of social learning by Arab citizens—a wave effect facilitated by the rapid diffusion of ideas, discourses, and practices from one country to another and their adaptation to local contexts—so too were the counter revolutionary strategies of regimes shaped by processes of learning and diffusion among regime elites, especially among those where protests began later in the sequence of events that constitute the Arab awakening” (Heydemann and Leenders 2014, 2)

Authoritarian learning can thus be conceptualized as learning mechanisms, which take place within authoritarian regimes and translate into the adaptation of ideas, practices, frames or policies by decision makers within the regime. Furthermore these mechanisms have to be based on experiences in other contexts or the direct exchange of knowledge (Heydemann and Leenders 2011, 649–652; 2014). Turning to the dynamics of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, they conclude
that, “[...] processes of authoritarian learning and adaptation among remaining authoritarian elites in the Arab World [...] had powerful effects on their calculus of the probabilities of regime survival” (Heydemann and Leenders 2011, 652).

However knowing learning happens does not mean we know what decisions will be taken. Which makes it merely impossible to pin down certain policies as a consequence of learning processes within authoritarian elites.

If regime elites become more alert due to unfolding mobilization and the diffusion of protests across their region they might however judge their own situation and the risk posed by an arising domestic challenge to their grip on power in a different light. It is however difficult to a priori determine the consequences for regime actions. One would expect authoritarian ruling elites to engage in preemptive regime-proofing activities and the coordinated preparation of responses to escalating contestation.

Such learning can be expected to be most visible during critical junctures as a consequence of regional upheavals and diffusing political contestation. It is in such episodes that regimes even publicly refer to the events in their neighbouring countries. Authoritarian learning can be expected to be more likely if countries are culturally similar, have comparable authoritarian regime types, are in the same region and traditionally display strong economic, social and political ties (Levitsky and Way 2010, 43–45). Especially in regions such as the Arab World that have a common language and media and are economically as well as politically interwoven the perception of what happens in the region is much more prominent than in others.

Yet direct forms of communication social interaction are no prerogative for learning processes. Decision makers may also learn from simple observation (e.g. through media or reports) of political dynamics in other countries. Although venues, such as regional institutions, summits, state visits and ministerial meetings can play a facilitating role. However it remains difficult to prove a causal link between certain meetings or geographic proximity and regime responses to protests on either side of the boarder.

Thus investigating learning processes through assessing the perceptions of members of authoritarian elites is a possibility to move beyond speculation
about congruence and correlation. It assumes that their perceptions and the impressions of events in neighbouring countries change the elite calculations about how to deal with protests when they pose a challenge to themselves.

Focussing on perceptions furthermore allows disentangling the oftentimes homogeneously treated ruling elite. Through interviews with varying political fractions and groups in Egypt and Morocco varying assessments of different relevant actors come to the fore and allow us not only an understanding of how learning processes fed into the estimation of their domestic situation but also into the crucial domestic decision making processes.

The recent events of the Arab Uprisings and the following autocratic restoration provides a template for further investigating external effects on authoritarian politics in times of contestation. In the following part of this paper I will introduce my methodological approach and present some preliminary illustrative case studies of Morocco and Egypt during 2011.

5. **Fieldwork and Interviews**

To investigate the role of transnational learning processes within regime elites I rely on semi-structured elite interviews, conducted in Morocco and Egypt during 2015 and 2016. The perceptions of events and developments in other countries conveys the researcher if and in how far such observations actually altered domestic decision-making process.

The conditions for elite interviews in Egypt and Morocco differ greatly. In Egypt the political situation after the 2013 coup against Mohammed Mursi is characterized by an unprecedented extend of state repression against anyone who might be perceived a threat to the current regime. This creates fear amongst large parts of society to talk about politics. This fear is not only relevant when speaking to former or current activists and opposition figures but also amongst former and current elites. During the first fieldwork phase in Egypt many people were unwilling to talk about politics in general. I tried to approach potential interviewees through referring to the events of 2011 in order to signal that I was not primarily interested in the current dynamics and entitled my requests for their expertise
instead of their account.

Generally my interviews can be subsumed as elite and actor interviews. The data and collected thus can be classified as account evidence. The interviewees can roughly be divided into three groups. The first group comprises experts from think tanks, universities or foundations with a profound knowledge of the political situation and development in the given country. These interviews primarily served three purposes. Firstly, a fruitful academic exchange about my research projects. Secondly, gaining important insights into the practices and norms of elite interviews and contacting decision-makers. Thirdly, these meetings were used to ask for primary interviewee contacts that would be relevant to my research and other scholars that work on similar issues.

The second group is the main target for my interviews and consists of government and party officials (current as well as former) and bureaucrats with an insight into political decision making processes. These interviews are the cornerstone of my dissertations empirical section as they provide the first collection of primary interviews with decision makers in the two countries about the episode of popular contestation in 2011.

Relevant parliamentarians or functionaries of regime-affiliated parties (such as the NDP in Egypt or the PAM, Istiqlal or RNI in Morocco) are amongst interviewees as well as officials in relevant ministries, members of the security apparatus or political consultants and experts. However –as stated above– crucial decision makers and policy makers in Egypt and Morocco are not easily identified. I had to rely on a combination of expert knowledge, few case studies and references within the elite network gathered in the context of the interviews in order to identify relevant interviewees.

The third group of interviewees I have labeled as NGOs and activists. Interview partners in this category form a kind of control group to the previous one. I am particularly interested if they experienced any chances in the incumbent governments approach to dealing with the protests during 2011 in political terms but also through their executives such as the police. If the descriptions of what happened and how different strategies of officials were employed and the chang-
es detected by the opposition activists and NGOs aiding them add up this increases confidence in the findings.

Overall I conducted 64 interviews in both countries. Due to the described discrepancy of access to interviewees a difference in quantity of interviews is likely inevitable. The interviews were conducted in English (primarily in Egypt), in French (in Morocco) and few in Arabic with a translator (in both countries).

**Table 1 interviews summary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Egypt</th>
<th>Morocco</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experts &amp; academics</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government officials, Party leaders &amp; bureaucrats</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activists, Media &amp; NGOs</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
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Most recent studies of the critical junctures across the Arab World in 2011 explained the stability of authoritarian regimes with reference to differences in domestic conditions such as political or socio-economic structures or different actor constellations (Josua and Edel 2014; Tétreault 2011; Yom and Gause 2012; Volpi 2013; Barany 2011; 2013; Lust 2011).

To the best of my knowledge – besides the mentioned contributions by Heydemann and Leenders (2011, 2014) – no empirical studies on learning within authoritarian regimes have been conducted. Investigating the recent protests in Morocco and Egypt during the critical junctures in early 2011, allows us to approximate how transnational learning altered the incumbent regime elites perceptions and informed their respective policy response to the protests.

The central problem of in-depth elite interviews in the context of critical junctures lies in ex-post rationalization and biases by the interviewees. They tend to overplay (and at times justify or even glorify) their own role and downplay international influences and the role of other (especially disliked) domestic actors.³

³ see also: Weyland 2014, 23
6. **Morocco during 2011**

--Missing: introduction to the Moroccan elite composition prior to 2011--

**Figure 1: Preliminary Actor Mapping Morocco in 2011**

This section is a first account of the interviews conducted during the fieldwork in Morocco during the period of 2013-2016. Tracing the effects of learning on policy response to the protests that appeared in 2011 through assessing the perceptions of authoritarian elites should give us a hunch on what assessments of events abroad actually fed into the decision-making processes in Morocco response to the protests.

Morocco is widely acknowledged as an authoritarian regime (Willis 2012; Benchemsi 2012; Barwig 2012; Hoffmann and König 2013). Despite its multi-party parliament the king reigns over all crucial policy fields through appointing the key ministers as he pleases. Furthermore he is the chief of all security forces and can dissolve parliament at anytime (Benchemsi 2012). The regime, which is oftentimes refereed to as the Makhzen\(^5\), encompasses the king and his advisors

\(^4\) Most interviews were held in the cities of Rabat, Marrakech and Casablanca

\(^5\) In Derija (Moroccan dialect), Makhzen means storage house. Historically it was used to describe the palace quarters where goods offered to or expropriated by the sultan’s representative were stored. Nowadays the Makhzen is used to describe the ruling elite of the Morocco, a patronage network of and allegiance-based relationships built around the palace. It includes the official government institutions and its personnel, such as the royal court, the royal security forces and the ministry for religious affairs, but also informal structures such as the king’s advisors, the palace’s shadow cabinet and multiple businesses that are owned by the palace and its associates.
often referred to as the shadow cabinet, the heads of the security forces, political party leaders and business elite circles.

On February 20\textsuperscript{th} 2011 the first protesters in Morocco took to the streets to express their grievances and demands. Despite conflict over the role of the palace the opposition movement also challenged the role of the king through putting forward a proposal to limit the competencies of the monarch and transition to a European model of parliamentary monarchy. The so-called 20\textsuperscript{th} February movement mobilized up to 600,000 people across 40 cities and towns all over the country in the following weeks.

The majority of the interview partners in Morocco have stated that the reaction by the King was strongly influenced by the events in the regional neighborhood and that the palace’s pre-emptive counter manoeuvring was crucial to regaining control of the situation (Hoffmann and König 2013; Benchmsi 2012, 56).

"He [the King] saw what happened in Tunisia. He saw what happened in Libya and Egypt. He felt that it was not the very ideal thing to be violent with mass demonstrations. I will offer them a reform."\textsuperscript{6}

"The King and his commission reacted so fast, because they were afraid after they saw what happened in Tunisia and in Egypt."\textsuperscript{7}

--Missing: More citations by government officials, parties and security apparatus--

The timing of the protests in Morocco – after the evictions of Ben-Ali and Mubarak – gave the regime a head start compared to other incumbent regimes in the region that were hit first by the protests. It gave the palace and other relevant parts of the Moroccan elite the time to adjust their assessment and thus take the protests more serious. Based on the observation of unfolding protests throughout the region and the warning signals through the experiences of fellow autocrats in Cairo and Tunis the regime recognized that they had to act quickly in order to maintain their grip on power.

In contrast to other regimes that were also struck later by the protest such as Syria, Yemen or Bahrain, Mohammed VI decided to not fall back on a coercive re-

\textsuperscript{6} Journalist and 20\textsuperscript{th} February movement interview 003

\textsuperscript{7} Human rights activist Interview 005
pression strategy. Instead the regime fell back to the established repertoire of response to contestation and initiated a mix of cooptation, targeted repression and initiated a constitutional reform from above (Bank 2012; Joffé 2009). The reform process initiated by the King’s speech on the 9th of March was seemingly open and democratic although the palace kept a tight grip on the constitutional reform process and ensured the result would not threaten its hegemonic position in Moroccan politics and economy (Saliba 2016; Benchemsi 2012).

The monarchy managed to regain control over the pathways of political contestation by channelling the demands into formal non-revolutionary political channels (Volpi 2013, 1). Activists, analysts and regime-affiliated actors alike, mentioned during the interviews that the response to the protests was faster and in many respects more compelling than expected (Perthes 2011, 118). Most importantly the Makhzen reacted very swiftly to the growing protests, with the seminal speech by the king broadcasted just 17 days after the first protests on the 8th of March. In a number of interviews, opposition activists as well as analysts remarked on the importance of the quick rhetorical response, pronouncing reforms and responsiveness to the protesters demands.

“*The reaction by the regime was very quick.*”

“The reaction by the King was very fast just a few days after the first protests.”

“The process of general large demonstrations was stopped through that reaction.”

“I think that the regime reacted quickly with the revision of the constitution to recalibrate the power and I think that this process of revision contributed to a transition that calmed down the spirits in Morocco that we did not have problems.”

--Missing: More citations by government officials, parties and security apparatus--

The quick response by the palace, promising a path to reform that would ensure the grievances and the demands of the protesters were considered, had immense signalling power. By putting the palace in the role of the mediator, the king was

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8 Activist 20th February movement Interview 009
9 Activist 20th February movement Interview 008
10 Ministry of Work and Social Affairs Interview 007
11 Prof of Law at Agdal University Interview 006
able to circumvent further mobilization against the palace and at the same time include several crucial actors into the calculated reform efforts.

After the initial regime reaction the monarchy kept a tight control of the reform process through appointing the members of the committee and decreeing the rules for the constitutional process. Not only was the speed of the response crucial, the strategic twist of delegitimizing the opposition by establishing a reform process, which was an important signal towards Moroccans that the palace had understood their legitimate demands.

The 20th February movement, which decided to boycott the reform process early on, faced decreasing support from the population due to the lack of a credible alternative to the reform plan of the regime. By putting the palace at the forefront of the reform efforts the regime not only re legitimized itself as a responsive initiator of a reform process, but by the same token, it neutralized the opposition movement as an actor for change: “The moves by Morocco’s King Mohammed VI, for instance, to offer limited but significant constitutional reforms seemed designed to pre-empt mass protests, which might otherwise have built up momentum as they did in Egypt and Tunisia” (Heydemann and Leenders 2014, 9).

The seminal speech from the 9th of March 2011 and establishment of the committee on the revision of the constitution brought the king back into the driver’s seat. One of the interviewed activists called this somewhat bold move “[...] the reoccupation of the opposition movement.” Ultimately, the kings’ response, took the wind out of the sails of the opposition movement. Another activist put it more bluntly:

“I think that the regime reacted quickly with the revision of the constitution to recalibrate the power and I think that this process of revision contributed to a transition that calmed down the spirits and the trajectories in Morocco that we did not have problems. But it was not the constitution that allowed that [...]”

--Missing: More citations by government officials, parties and security apparatus--

12 ATTAC activist Interview 002
13 Law Professor Interview 006
Main cross group references from interviews conducted in Morocco:

- Events unfolded rapidly in 2011. Protests in were unprecedented in the era of King Mohammed VI.
- In the beginning the protests were seen as isolated events that would not affect Morocco but over time with more countries being affected throughout the region this perception changed (especially after protests swiped away Mubarak and diffused into Bahrain).
- King Mohammed VI. came back early from summer holidays in France as protests started in Morocco and an informal emergency council at the palace was formed (consisting of advisors and trustees of the king).
- Protests in other countries served as a pre-warning for Morocco that was later hit by mass mobilization.
- Plan to act swiftly, offering political reforms as a signal to the subjects in order to neutralize the capacity o the challengers to mobilize.
- Spreading violence and instability across the region also contributed to less people participating in protests from March onwards (Libya intervention, violence increasing in Egypt, Syria and Bahrain and Yemen).

7. **Egypt during 2011**

    ---Missing: introduction to the Egyptian elite composition prior to 2011---

    ---Missing: Egypt case study will be inserted here—

    ---Missing: Quotes by regime elite and opposition actors from Egypt---
8. **Conclusion**

This paper set out to explore how elite perceptions during the Arab Uprisings might have led to an adaptation of strategic calculations that could be subsumed as transnational learning within authoritarian regimes.

---Missing: Summary of Morocco and Egypt case studies---

In order to increase the variety and scope of the empirical material supplementary methods and data sources will be turned to. In addition to more semi-structured interviews with relevant actors, I will also include press releases, speeches and statements into the analysis in further versions of this paper.

Generally, this paper pleads for further research to specify the mechanisms, arenas and actors through which external processes influence authoritarian decision-making. Connecting the dots from the external environment of authoritarian regimes’ to the much too often autarkical conceptualized authoritarian regimes through looking into mechanisms of authoritarian learning.
9. Bibliography


