Reflections on the Arab Spring Revolutions: The Southern and Northern Ramifications of the Processes of Democratisation in the Arab Countries

In the last decades, the area of political science devoted to the study of processes of democratisation has been without any doubt one of the most prolific among those focused on the study of politics. This discipline, that has been denominated “transitology” has examined the different processes of democratisation that have occurred since the Second World War and especially those that have taken place since the “Carnation Revolution” in Portugal paying attention to the connection between the processes of democratisation and the presence of dynamics and factors that could link democratisation in different societies. Since the 1970s, strong processes of democratic transformation have taken place in Southern Europe in the 1970s, Latin America and other Southern societies in the 1980s, Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s combined with more limited attempts at democracy in some Asian or African countries. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has traditionally been an area lagging behind in terms of democratisation but the situation has changed since the 2009 Iranian green revolution and, especially, with the Tunisian protest that gave way what the Western media have labelled as the “Arab Spring” that changed radically the political map in Tunisia, Egypt, Lybia and Yemen and has forced some changes in many other countries in the area. Transitologists have turned their attention to these societies and are reflecting on the prospects for democratisation and democracy in these countries. The aim of this paper is not to describe how democratisation is occurring in the MENA societies, but to make a more general reflection on the process of democratisation and to try to understand the impact of the “Arab awakening” on our understanding of democracy in our contemporary societies and the connection that the Spring revolutions have with other processes in favor of democratic change.

Transitology and Democratisation in the Middle East and Northern Africa

The Middle East and Northern Africa has always been in the studies on democratisation a geopolitical area of low relevance. International rankings have positioned this group of countries in the bottom of a world scale of democratisation. Even after the events of the “Arab Spring” the MENA societies continue occupying the last position. According to the 2012 Freedom in the World report, only 2% of the population of this area live in free countries (that is the people living in Israel) while an additional 13% lives in partly free states (Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon and Kuwait).¹ The 2011 Democracy Index of The Economist Intelligence Unit maintains a similar status for these societies being the area with the lowest democratic score (3.62 out of 10) and not being considered any of the regimes in the area as full democracies something that does not occur in the rest of the geopolitical areas in which the world is divided by the Economist Intelligence Unit.²

Several authors (see for example, Stepan and Robertson, 2004; Lakoff, 2004; Harik, 2006; Goldsmith, 2007³) have used the term “exceptionalism” to refer to the countries of the area

and explain the difficulties or even the incompatibility of some of the elements present in those societies with the democratic ethos. The widely accepted notion of “exceptionalism” or the negative assessments towards the chances of democratic transition in the MENA countries are challenged by the latest developments in the area and transitologists will have to reassess their analyses of these societies in order to be able to explain the latest developments. In fact, some students of the MENA countries have already criticised the way in which the mainstream transitology has evaluated the area. For instance Olimat indicates that ‘most of the literature of the third Wave that concerns the Middle East examined the “why” aspect of democracy rather than the “how,” that is, researching why the Arab Middle East and the Islamic world are undemocratic instead of investigating “how” to bring about a successful process of transition to democracy.’ This idea is shared by Niblock that adds that the assessments of the MENA political situation are influenced by a traditional understanding of the politics in these societies and that the advances are benchmarked with the ideal models of democracy. In his opinion, ‘having written off the political systems of the area as being congenitally undemocratic, researchers have clearly felt that it would be a waste of time to examine or analyse the participative or representative aspects of the systems. There has consequently been very little empirical research on either the elections or the parliamentary/consultative bodies of the Middle East. Yet there are elements of accountability, representation and political conflict which are present in these processes and institutions.’

It is evident that the difficulties of the international rankings of democratisation or the majority of the political scientists to anticipate and preview the developments unfolding in the MENA societies will require a critical self-assessment of the studies on the area and of democratisation in general. Nevertheless, we will not analyse in the paper what the mistakes of the political studies on the MENA countries could be but to focus on the second element: how democratisation studies are impacted by the developments happening in the MENA societies.

This paper is inserted in a more general understanding that processes of democratisation have strong political impacts in societies that are not directly embarked in a process of regime change. Since the 1970s, the external dimension of the processes of democratisation has been profusely studied and has become central for the transition paradigm. Some of the seminal works in transitology studied in depth the external dimensions of the process of democratisation and have been very influential on the internal-external divide when analysing processes of democratisation. From the classic understanding of democracy as a product of the internal development of societies, classic transitology in the 1970s and early 1980s added

---


the role of the internal actors (elite and non-political actors) to add a stronger emphasis in the 1990s, inspired by the processes initiated in Latin America, the external dimension as a central element to explain processes of regime change. The notion of democratic wave described by Samuel Huntington is used once and again to describe processes of democratisation that are initiated in one country but that trespass the borders of that state and inspires similar developments in other neighbouring or distant societies. When analysts refer to the latest developments in the MENA countries they tend to use terms like “Arab spring”, “Arab revolution” or “Green revolutions” among others that are referring to the international dimension of this process of democratisation that is not occurring just in a particular society, but that from the original Iranian or Tunisian sparks it is spreading to other societies that are inspired by these developments and the achievements of the reformers elsewhere. Scholars discuss the beginning or end of democratic waves (see for example the discussion of the number of wave that the Arab Spring would constitute) but not the paradigm. There is a widespread consensus among academics about the need of incorporating the international context and the external conditionings to any contemporary study of democratisation. But the processes of transformation that Middle Eastern and Northern African societies are not interesting to study just from the perspective of the internal changes that are provoking. There is an element that makes them unique and that increase their relevance for the students of democratic transformation. Some Northern ramifications of the revolutions can be observed and despite the process is in its earliest stages, there have already been some developments that deserve the attention of the students of democracy and democratisation.

The Northern Ramification of the “Arab Spring” movements.

If the literature on democratic development is analysed, it can be witnessed that the processes of democratisation have tended to advance in circles from a central core of countries to semi-peripheral or peripheral countries. If we analyse the waves of democracy as described by Huntington, the first attempts at democracy, what this author calls “the long wave of democratisation”, take place from the early XIX century in Europe and the United States until the Second World War. Originated as a consequence of the developments in England, the British American colonies and France, and ideologically linked to the enlightenment philosophy, it is European countries and developed colonies the subject of these primeval processes of democratisation. The second cycle, the one that took place between 1943 and 1973, included several Western countries that had suffered a democratic breakdown as a consequence of the interwar period or the World War II, and several non-Western societies that after the process of decolonisation tried to establish democratic regimes. Originated by the push of the victors of the conflict for the democratic refoundation of the European societies over the pillars of democratic institutions, many countries opted for a liberal democratic model that in many cases failed to consolidate. In the third democratic wave, the one initiated in Southern Europe after the Portuguese revolution, semi-peripheral European countries (the Southern European authoritarian regimes, excluded from the second wave),

---


8 Samuel P. Huntington, op. cit., p. 16.
Latin American, Asian and African dictatorships and finally communist regimes were impacted by the democratic tide. This was, again, a process that was moving towards the periphery and that was supported and encouraged by the Western democratic societies. However, the nature of the transformations occurring recently is different. The revolutions in the MENA countries have, for the first time, impacted the Northern societies and the “democratic wave” is not just having a centrifugal effect, but also a centripetal one. The consequences of the attempts at democracy in these societies are not just having an impact in these societies and other that are in a lesser stage of democratisation, but, we can talk about a “reverse wave” not as Huntington described it, “a process in which some but not all of the countries that had previously made the transition to democracy reverted to nondemocratic rule,” but a reverse wave that affects the understanding and the practice of democracy in the countries that are considered consolidated democracies. This questioning of the essence of democracy and the implementation of its theoretical postulates is a very interesting element especially in a scenario of crisis of democracy in the Western societies. It is paradoxical that in a context of democratic expansion with more and more countries transforming and adapting their institutions to the democratic norm, there is a questioning of the essence of democracy, or better to say, of the application of democracy in the Western societies. The aim of this paper is precisely to describe the connections existing between the Arab spring movements and the protest movements in the Western societies, focusing in one of the most advanced from the point of view of its theoretical production as it is the “indignados” movement in Spain.

Demanding changes: the Movement of the 15-M in Spain

Several are the names received by those that have protested in the last months in Spain: the “indignados”, the 15-M or the Spanish revolution (denomination that links it with the Arab revolutions). It is difficult to characterise a movement as the one studied since is lack of formal organisation, the heterogeneity of its social base and the rapid evolution of its formulations make it difficult to frame it. In any case, as a very general proposition it could be said that this movement united those citizens that considered that the orthodox channels of political participation strangled the Spanish civil society and that under a facade of formal democracy the capacity of the individuals to influence the output of politics has been eliminated. The name of “indignados” (it could be translated to English language as “indignants” or “outraged citizens”) makes reference to the feeling of indignation and outrage generated by the developments taking place that make some citizens feel powerless in front of decision making powers that should be accountable to the electors. The “indignados” movement in Spain is inspired by the movements of protest in Greece and Portugal, the developments in Iceland and, as we will explain in detail, the Arab Spring, movement. From the intellectual point of view, the figure of Stéphane Hessel and particularly his work Time for Outrage: Indignez-vous!\(^\text{10}\) has served as inspiration to the movement in his demand for a mobilisation to save freedom demanding the young people “to have a reason to be outraged.”\(^\text{11}\) A wide variety of people in Spain felt that indignation that Hessel described and the movement was able to gather different individuals and group with different agendas. One of the cores around the

\(^{10}\) Stephane Hessel; Time for Outrage: Indignez Vous! (New York: Twelve, 2010).
\(^{11}\) Ibid, p. 16
movement developed was the group named “Democracia Real, ¡Ya!” (Real Democracy, Now!) that was the group that originally summoned the 15 of May demonstrations in more than fifty Spanish cities. Their manifesto is one of the most developed lists of proposals formulated around the movimiento of “indignados” and summarises the most central demands of this movement. According to their manifesto, the priorities of the movement are “equality, progress, solidarity, freedom of culture, sustainability and development, welfare and people’s happiness.”

These priorities are substantiated mainly in two different policy axes. The first one is the one related with the economic reform and the protection of the welfare state. The “indignados” movement is very critic with the development of a capitalist model that lacks a social character and particularly with the economic reforms that are finishing with the European welfare states. Thus, the movement of the 15-M, as Magallanes describes, attacks “the obsolete and anti-natural current economic model that blocks the social machinery in a self-destructing spiral, making few people richer and making poorer the rest [...]. Money has preeminence over the human being, and it should be put at our service.”

The economic reform and the transformation of the economic system towards a more egalitarian model is one of the central objectives of the movement.

The second of the axes has a political component. Real Democracy Now! has made a very strong emphasis in the need of implementing formulas that would bring the institutions closer to the citizens. According to its manifesto “politicians should be bringing our voice to the institutions, facilitating the political participation of citizens through direct channels that provide the greatest benefit to the wider society, not to get rich and prosper at our expense, attending only to the dictatorship of major economic powers and holding them in power through a bipartidism headed by the immovable acronym PP & PSOE.”

This claim, the tacit alliance of the two biggest parties, to alternate in government impeding the access of smaller groups. And despite formally, according to the Spanish Constitution of 1978, the electoral law must contain the principle of proportional representation (article 68.3), the reality is that studies show that the weight of the two most popular option had been growing in the general elections before the elections 2011. In order to transform the political reality of Spain, the movement of “indignados” proposes “a proportional and more equitable Electoral Law, the separation of powers, the internal democratisation of political parties, the binding referenda or the removal of the privileges of the political class.”

The 15th of May 2011 is the day that gave name to the movement and was the date chosen by the collective Democracia Real, ¡Ya! to summon the demonstration that gathered thousands of Spanish “indignados” and was the starting point for consolidation of the movement that received not only the attention of the Spanish public but also the international one. The demonstrations on the 15th were followed by the establishment of permanent camps of “indignados” in squares of the main Spanish cities (the case of Sol square in Madrid and

---

14 ‘Manifesto’, op. cit.
Catalunya square in Barcelona were especially notable, but the camps were set in many Spanish cities) that become the gathering places for “indignados” were they could work in their proposals and practice assembly-democracy. The establishment of camps inspired the “occupy” movement that followed similar tactics in different cities around the world. The choice of the 15\textsuperscript{th} of May was not done at random: it was one week before the local and regional elections were going to take place in Spain. In fact, one of the main aims of the movement was to inspire the Spanish citizens to transform the political map of the country and force the traditional and dominant political parties to opt for a reform agenda that would improve the quality of democracy in Spain. One of the paradoxes of the initial phase of the movement was that in those elections despite the massive mobilisations the electoral results confirmed the hegemony of the two main Spanish parties (the Popular and Socialist parties) that obtained almost two thirds of the votes despite the fact that their combined results were 6\% lower than in the 2007 elections. Since the 22-M elections, the mobilisations of the “indignados” have continued with their pressure, especially important in June with the massive demonstration of the 19\textsuperscript{th} of June when hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in different Spanish cities. Nevertheless, the movement was not able to impede the victory of the conservative Popular Party in the elections of November 2011 that was the most voted party with almost 45\% of the votes and a comfortable majority of 186 seats of the total of 350 of the lower chamber of the Spanish “Cortes.” The 15-M movement did not campaign for any party and did not have a recommendation for the electors. In fact, the movement was divided among the different options available. As Garrido pointed out, there was a strong debate among the different currents with the libertarian group opting for the simple abstention, the white vote that neutrals and sceptics proposed and the vote for smaller parties that leftists, ecologists, nationalists and reformists proposed.\footnote{Emilio Garrido, ‘¿Qué Votará el 20-N?’, \textit{El País}, 19 Octubre 2011, p.} It is interesting to note that the participation in the elections compared to 2008 was 5 points lower and the number of void votes doubled. Beyond that, the “indignados” did not manage to impulse the radical change in the Spanish political panorama that they propose in their manifestos. Since the general elections of November 2011, the movement has adopted a low profile response to new government, avoiding an open confrontation but maintaining their supporters alert and ready to be mobilised and opened a debate about the appropriateness of creating a political party to open an electoral front against the Spanish political establishment.

\textbf{The Connections between the Arab Spring and the Spanish Revolution: The Objective of the Revolts}

When the revolutionary movements in the MENA countries and the 15-M protests in Spain are analysed there are many elements that are common to them. Despite the fact that the MENA regimes are, as we have pointed out before, according to all ranks on democracy very far from the standards of the Southern European societies, there are elements that link these two processes. And the fact that it is in this case the Arab Spring movement the one that has inspired the “northern” democritisations should make students of democratisation on the nature of democratic transitions in the XXI century and reconsider if the four decades that have passed since the beginning of the third wave of democracy started have had an impact in the way in which the processes of democratisation have to be understood.
The first of the connections that could be established between the two revolutionary processes is in relation with the demands of the movements. The two guiding lines in the processes are democratic participation and economic reforms. The political and the economic appears linked in the two movements but the question is if that the presence of the two elements as core demands of the Spanish “indignados” is a consequence of developments in the MENA countries.

The linkage between the economic development and the democratisation processes has been profusely studied by social scientists. The seminal article of Lipset analysing the relation between the two variables, has been followed by a myriad of other works that have questioned or supported Lipset’s theses. In fact, it is possible to talk about the existence of developmental paradigm in democratisation studies that was partially questioned by the transitology studies mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

Thus, there is nothing too knew in the presence of the economic and political vindications in the both the Arab and Spanish Springs. The interconnections between political and economic demands are a constant in many processes of democratic transformation and if we analyse the major processes of democratic transition it is relatively easy to find situations of poor economic performance surrounding them. The presence of those demands is related with the internal developments in those societies: the lack of opportunities for young graduates in the MENA countries and the change of the social conditions that the people who live in Spain are experiencing in the last years. The lack of the capacity of the political leaders to give responses or, in the case of the MENA countries, the linkage between the political establishment and the economic oligarchy, we factors that spurred the social unrest that gave way to the revolts. But we cannot refer to a diffusion effect that would explain the Spanish revolt as a consequence of the ones in the MENA countries. Perhaps, we can talk about an inspiration, thought. In the months previous to Spanish 15-M in the Spanish traditional media and social networks were devoting attention to the developments in the societies in the other side of the Mediterranean sea and that must have led to some of the “indignados” to think about the state of democracy in Spain. One of the most used slogans of the 15-M movement was precisely “they call it democracy and it is not,” that makes reference to the need of evaluating properly how the different political systems work and compare it with the ideal of democracy. But to talk about causality would be too daring.

To conclude this section, despite the fact that in both shores of the Mediterranean the vindications were similar, it would not be proper to talk about contagion. The demands that the Spanish protesters made were consequence of the internal situation in that country and the Arab Spring revolutions may have helped, in the best of the cases serve as inspiration but not as a trigger.

The Connections between the Arab Spring and the Spanish Revolution: Methods, Tactics and Strategies.

The second of the elements that bring the revolutionary movements in the MENA countries and the revolts that have occurred in Spain since the 15 March 2011 is the related with the way in which the revolts have occurred. We are referring to the means that the protesters have used to challenge their regimes and the response they have given to their governments in

---

their attempts to de-activate their protests. This is without any doubt one of the most interesting aspects of the Arab Spring revolutions and that is going to have strong effects in the way in which processes of social protest are going to adopt in the future.

There are basically two features that make the revolutions in the MENA countries different to processes of democratisation in the past: the use of information technology in their revolts and the occupation of public spaces.

In relation with the use of mass media technology, it is obvious that these revolts are a product of their time and the protesters are going to use the technology that is available to them. The invention of the printing press, telegraph, telephones, radio, tv sets, etc, has always used by those challenging the established power in their attempts to transform their societies. As Morozov indicates that “the exultant hordes of attractive, obstreperous young people, armed with fax machines and an occasional Xerox copier, taking on the brutal dictators—and winning: that already happened twenty years ago, and the venue was Eastern Europe.”19 The difference is the impact that the use of information technology has in the processes of democratisation and democratic transformation. The use of social media offers possibilities to the protesters that can alter the way in which students of political science understand the processes of democratic transition.

The “Arab Spring” movement activists, in contrast to those that participated in the processes of democratisation that occurred in the XX century had at their disposition social network media that allowed them to challenge their regimes in ways impossible before. Networks as Facebook or Twitter, applications like Youtube or Flicker, the use of blogs, live streaming, e-mail messaging give protesters a potential never dreamt by those that attempted at democracy in previous processes of democratic transformation themselves. The use of the ICT with revolutionary purposes develop in the course of the Arab spring inspired the defenders of a democratic reform in the Western World. The events in the MENA countries served to the movement of “indignados” as a school from which they could learn the different possibilities offered by the new technologies.

Recent research on the 15-M movement shows the importance of the ICT for the birth and consolidation of the movement. Between from 16 to 18 May 2011 (the key days of the actions of the 15M), studies20 show that there was a 20% increase in mobile data traffic in Spain, with the number of requests being even higher, which at one point resulted in collapsed services at Puerta del Sol in Madrid. According to the research “Analysis of the 15M movement” carried out by Gatherestudios, 82% of the respondents learn about the movement using social networks. Only 7% of the interviewed citizens were not members of the social networks.21 The opinion poll on Spanish Young people in 2011 made by the Observatory of Spanish Youth of the Ministry of Health Social Services and Equality of Spain22 indicates that almost 80% of the

people that have participated at least once in the mobilisations have contributed to the dissemination of information using social networks. In the same study, half of those that participated in the mobilisation believe that social networks are more trustworthy than the traditional means of communication to get information about the 15M movement.

There are several ways through which the social network technology can contribute to the processes of democratisation. Breindle, citing Vedel refers to three axes of the use of internet for political aspects by social movements.\(^\text{23}\) The first of the arenas of the use of internet related tools is “information”. The activists are able, with the use of these tools to gather, share and disseminate information. This is absolutely crucial in regimes where the state had a virtual monopoly of the means of communication. As Miladi indicated describing the situation of the pre-revolutionary Tunisia, there was “no room for opposing opinions; it is taboo to criticize the president, cabinet ministers or government corruption. Civil society organizations, lawyers, academics and trade unions do not have a platform to express their critical views on state media or ‘independent’ media.”\(^\text{24}\) The establishment of networks of democratic activists that use the technology available to share information that opposes the news that are reported by the means of communication loyal to the government are very important to understand the shape of the democratic transformations that are occurring after the turn of the century. The creation of networks of activists allows the democratic oppositions the possibility of not just connecting the rest of the community in the country but also engage the international public opinion in a way that before was impossible. A good example of this is the use of pictured and videos that are uploaded by users that are broadcasted to anywhere in the world where the viewer has an internet connection\(^\text{25}\). In addition to that, pictures and videos could be captured by anyone with a mobile phone equipped with a camera, something that is quite common everywhere. This technological upgrade has transformed the citizens in what academics call “citizen-journalist”. The dissemination of this information is immediate and can be used very effectively to respond to the official discourse of the pro-governmental means of communication.

The second of the axes is what Vedel refers as “discussion and debate.” Information technologies offer to the citizens just a mean to deliver information but a space to discuss the information and debate ideas. Social media should not just understood as the channel through which individuals will connect creating networks of activists or informed citizens, but also a space to be conquered and used by groups that share ideas or goals. Social media appears, thus, as a space that social movements can use to resist and fight the governments that they try to erode. Internet spaces appear then as free-of-government spaces (obviously, autocratic government will put very strong efforts to gain access to these spaces of freedom) that citizens of countries where the government is able to exert a very strong social control can gather to organize their resistance. Facebook groups, blogs, bbs networks, forums of debate, are used by

---


\(^{25}\) See the case study of the facebook pages ”’We Are All Khaled Said” as an example of the use that social media can have for protest movements, Sahar Khamis and Katherine Vaughn, ‘We Are All Khaled Said: The Potentials and Limitations of Cyberactivism in Triggering Public Mobilization and Promoting Political Change,’ Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research, Vol. 4, n. 2+3, pp. 145-63.
citizens to exchange ideas and define their tactics in their attempt to change the political scene in their societies.

The third of the axes described by Vedel is “mobilisation.” The new technologies can be used to organise events and inform potential attendants with a speed that is very difficult for the political and security forces to match. But it is not the capacity of mobilization that the social movements what has been increased. Also the range of actions available for opposition movements has increased with a new field that could be called cyber-opposition.

It is fair at this point to question if the use of the new technology implies a qualitative leap forward in the possibilities of those that promote the democratisation of the their societies or if, on the contrary, there is an over exaggeration of the impact of the new technologies. At the end of the day, the use of the latest technologies to accompany the extension of some ideas or a particular political project is not new. From narratives to the social networks passing through the printing press, pamphlets, mass media or internet, revolutionaries have used all the available technology to try to achieve their goals. But it is naive not to think that the governments they oppose have also the same technology at their disposition to counteract the efforts at socio-political change that the first aim at. In fact, the social media offer governments a perfect opportunity to control and repress those that are critical with the regime. Golkar explains it well when he argues that “While the Internet helps the citizenry to challenge autocratic rules, it perpetuates pervasive surveillance over society, allowing authoritarian regimes access to a massive amount of information, including previously private information.”

In addition to that, the social media expose not just those committed with a political change but also their circle of friends and acquainted. This offers extraordinary capacities to non-democratic government to fight those that oppose the regime.

One way or another, there is a new element related with the existence of new technologies. This fourth axis that can be added that is the one of identity. This dimension is, precisely, the one that will have a deeper impact in the issue of democratisation and may justify a change in the understanding of the processes of democratisation in contemporary societies opposed to the classic processes of democratic transformation studied by the literature on transitions. The social media became a place of socialisation on the democratic values. It is not just that is a territory for debate and exchange of ideas but also a space where the participating citizens educate themselves in the democratic values. Thus, social media should not just be perceived as a tool for change but also as an agent of change. In the social media, opposed to other traditional forms of political engagement, the interchanges between the citizens that participate actively in the process of political change and those that are not but can potentially join them multiply and are not surrounded by a halo of dangerous clandestinity. It requires a deeper amount of compromise to attend a political raid or an assembly where questions related with the opposition to a regime are going to be discussed.

In the most extreme of the cases, through social networks, democratisers can build a parallel virtual society in which the citizens that belong will be able to live and organise themselves. This is the case of the initiative VirtualPol that agglutinates a good number of citizens that sympathise, belong to the movement of indignados in Spain or that simply want to take part in

---

The creation of a parallel society organised under the rules that those citizens would like to be implemented at a societal level is an interesting initiative that helps the movement to strengthen the bonds among the members of the movement. It helps also to train their members in the processes associated with the application of those principles they fight for and learn from the experience.

The impact of this technology could change our understanding of politics and the engagement between the citizens and those that govern. Toret uses the expression “technopolitics” to describe the developments taking place in Spain since 2010. He defines technopolitics as the ‘tactical and strategical use of the digital tools for the organisation, communication and collective action.’ The social networks become not just space in which individuals will communicate with each other but something that transform the way in which the citizens live politics. Toret refers to the connected multitudes as a new political actor that transform the traditional understanding of political action.

Looking from the perspective of democratic transformation, one of the main consequences of the use of social media technologies is the geographical conditionings disappear. The concept of “location” stops being important since physical distance does not impede individuals to be in virtual direct contact with other members of the opposition group. This is a factor that changes radically our understanding of opposition movements today compared to the ones that existed in the times of the classic studies on democratic transformation. And this does transform the traditional divide internal-external actors. The classic literature on democratic transition acknowledged, as we have referred, above the importance of the external dimension of the process of democratisation (the international context) as well as the role of external agents (in the form of foreign governments and states, diasporas, international governmental or non-governmental organisations...). Now, the division withers away since social media allows that external actors engage in a very close way in the processes of democratisation of other countries. This is something that we have seen during the revolutionary processes in the MENA countries: locals being accompanied by citizens living in other countries sharing the goal of expanding the democratic ideals. This has been particularly acute in the case of diasporas and the exiled where virtually and without returning to their countries could contribute to the process of political change. It is likely that in the future we could witness the emergence of networks of democratic activists that will cooperate with local democratizing in the different countries and this could be the base for the generation of an identity of a global democratic citizen. In fact, a very interesting debate has been open about the new forms in which other governments and societies can impulse the attempts in favor of democratisation in authoritarian regimes: the Swedish Minister for International Development Cooperation, Gunilla Carlsson, in an opinion article in on January 2011 the newspaper Expressen declared that ‘the net activists are the new democracy fighters.’

---

27 The number of members of this virtual community is around 1800 members. The number rose to more than 5000 but those citizens that do not show any activity in three months are eliminated from the social network.


However, it is necessary to question the extent to which this potential technological impact in the way in which political processes will be taking place in the future has already been experienced with the movements of democratic transformation following the beginning of the Arab Spring. Academics are trying to analyse the data generated during these processes and draw conclusions about how the technology mediated the developments taking place on all these societies. The theoretical models suggest that the interaction between different citizens in different countries would change the understanding of contemporary politics. However, data shows that it is not so clear that this occurring now but, on the contrary, would be something likely to happen in the future. It is not so clear that the international dimension shows interaction rather dissemination of information. For example, if we take the Facebook pages “we are all Khaled Said” we see a notable difference in the number of people that “liked” the page in English (more than 330,000) and the group in Arabic (more than 3,200,000). The language barriers still operate and despite translating programs and applications are developing (and surely will develop in the future) or the learning of foreign languages is becoming the norm in most of the educative systems, in the case of the Arab revolutions have played an important role limiting the capacity of activists in other countries to participate in a more direct form. Some journalists or bloggers have acknowledged this reality creating contents in different languages (for example the Syrian journalist Dima Kathib uses Arabic, English, French and Spanish in her tweets). While pictures, videos or streaming do not need any form of translation, interchange of ideas or discussions require that the participants know the vehicular language and this has been a serious impediment for the establishment of a stronger link between the Arab Spring movements and the democratic reform movement in the Western countries.

The second of the strategies used during the processes of social change in the MENA countries and that have had a strong influence in the critical movement in the Western countries is the public demonstration and the occupation of public spaces. The avenue Bourguiba in Tunisia, Tahrir square in Cairo, Manama square in Bahrain are places in which the opposition to the regimes have been able to claim for the movement. The occupation of buildings, the marches of demonstration in the centre of cities is not in itself a new phenomenon when analysing studies on political revolutions. However, what it makes these actions different to others before is the persistence in time. In the Arab Spring revolutions, the citizens defied the regimes claiming the public space as a space for the people. To certain extent this represents the ideal of the old Athenian democracy the assembly was taking in an open space where citizens join to discuss the politics of the city.

The democratic reform movements in the Western countries have replicated this tactic. In the case of the “occupy” movement, it is precisely the action of the occupation of public spaces the one that gives name to the movement. In the case of the 15-M movement in Spain, the “indignados” have occupied public squares in the major Spanish cities being the occupation of the Sol square in Madrid and Catalonia square in Barcelona the two major concentrations. These are actions full of symbolism with the citizens regaining the public space and claiming that citizens should have the power to decide returned.

Conclusions
After analysing the links existing between the contemporary processes in both shores of the Mediterranean, there are links between the two processes: the revolutionary in the MENA
countries and the reformist in Western Europe. The technology available for the democratisers to use have change the way in which the protest take place and has made it more open to actors that in the past they would have been passive witnesses. Social media allows the interaction between people that actively participate in the processes of social change and those that support them. Social media became a space for the interchange of ideas, the organisations of the actions against the regimes or for the interaction of those that participate in the protest. At the same time social media is a window to other societies and similar movements in other parts of the world. All this changes the geography of the processes of democratic transformation where the traditional division internal-external begins to be questionable.

There a process of contamination between the Southern and Northern movements in favor of democracy where, for the first time, peripheral countries have been able to inspire reformist movements in the Western world. That influence more related with the tactics (there is a clear inspiration in the occupation of the public spaces in the Western cities by the events that took place before in some of the MENA countries) than with the aims of the protests (being the two groups of societies in very different levels of democratic development). Despite the different objective conditions in the two shores of the Mediterranean sea, the connections of the two processes are evident and it can be expected that in the future the connections between the democratising movements will be thicker than they had been in the classic processes of democratisation and wave effects will not follow the centre to periphery patters but also sideways.