Michel Camau and Frédéric Vairel (eds.), Soulèvements et Recompositions Politiques dans le Monde Arabe, (Uprisings and Political Realignments in the Arab World)

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The Arab uprisings of 2010/11 and their development since then have been the subject of numerous debates, conferences, workshops and publications over the last few years. The unexpected character of those events in some cases, the quick and to a certain extent unexpected fall of several regimes in that region, or the several novelties they brought, all attracted scholars from different fields of social sciences, with different backgrounds, and sometimes, with little to no previous knowledge about Arab politics and society, not to speak about Arab culture and language. A regular tendency in all those writings and academic encounters was the resort to theories and comparisons with what were considered similar events in other parts of the world in order to try to make sense of what was taking place.

Soulèvements et Recompositions Politiques dans le Monde Arabe, a volume edited by Michel Camau and Frédéric Vairel is one of the noticeable exceptions to those publications. Resulting from a workshop in May 2012 on the Arab Uprisings held during the annual meeting of the Quebecois Political Science Association, the volume brings together a wide range of specialists of Arab politics and society. In this volume, authors and editors try to make sense of what happened from the points of views of different social science disciplines, while keeping in consideration the wide diversity as well as the specificity of the developments in that region.

The editors and authors of the book attempt to present a comprehensive and meaningful analysis of the events that have been shaking what they refer to as the Arab world since December 2010. Their focus is hence not only on the causes of the uprisings, which pushed some to speak about an Arab Spring, but also on the very often violent and bloody resilience of some regimes which has pushed others to speak about an Arab Autumn. It is also to the credit of the editors and authors that some tendencies that will have long lasting effects on the political spectrum of the Arab world are explored in the volume. The book is divided into four coherent parts that make for a cohesive ensemble. In the first one, scholars discuss the reasons behind the revolts. In the second one, other scholars explore the few cases in which little to no uprisings took place, and bring explanations to why those countries were exceptions. In the third part, hypotheses on the resilience of authoritarian regimes in the region are debated, and in the fourth and last one, scholars attempt to define
the long standing and transformative effects of the uprisings on politics of the Arab world.

The volume starts with a thematic and conceptual introduction to the different contributions in which Camau and Vairel, the editors, seek to provide a cohesive rationale behind the whole book and bring coherence to its different parts. In an excellent presentation chapter, Camau and Vairel start by distinguishing among the different uprising movements of 2010/11 and their limitations, before they revisit the different forms the resilience of authoritarian regimes in the region took. According to them, a key impact of the uprisings was the questioning of the myth of ‘Arab exceptionalism’ to justify the continuing centrality of authoritarian regimes in the region. New evidence had to be dealt with, such as the extent of the use of repression and its efficiency, or the effectiveness of small reforms in opening political systems and simultaneously pushing back radical changes. Camau and Vairel also discuss what I consider to be the main enduring consequence of the 2010/11 uprisings, i.e., the transformation of the political spaces and the planting of the seeds of societies that will be less acquiescing and more questioning than the ones that currently exist.

The first part of the book illustrates its richness and strength. As opposed to some analyses that are dismissive of Tunisia and focus on Egypt, and emphasise the importance of the use of the Internet and other superficial aspects of the events of 2010/11, the 6 chapters that make this discussion start with the events in Tunisia and go beyond the clichés of what some insisted on calling the Internet revolution. According to Lecomte, bringing down the Ben Ali regime took more than the Internet or social media, and is the result of developments that favoured the emergence of new kinds of activism in the country, which had been taking place for many years, and which managed to be transferred from the net to the street – and sometimes back to the net - quickly and effectively. As for Egypt, Beinin and Duboc help the reader situate the events of 2011 in the larger spectrum of political developments that have been taking place in that country for many years, and at least since 2006. Their argument is that the revolution that brought down Mubarak cannot be separated from the consolidation that the workers’ movements and the unions went through in the second half of the 2000s. And although the Yemeni case is missing, this part of the edited volume is quite complete as it discusses both the Libyan and the Syrian cases, which, despite their parallels, remain different since the Gadhafi regime was brought down by a revolt that was supported by an external intervention whereas the Assad regime in Syria still resists.

In the second part of the book, Algeria, Morocco and Lebanon are presented as cases in which protests did not lead to the fall of regimes, or even to significant changes. In the four chapters constituting this part, the question that comes back consistently is why, despite the existence of similar authoritarian regimes, and despite the popular protests that took to the streets, the regimes in those three countries resisted very well and how. According to the authors, causes of the resistance of the regimes are to be found in the limitations of the protest movements as well as in the political circumstances that had existed in those three countries.

The third part of the book deals with the resilience of authoritarianism in the region, and tackles specifically the cases of Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Bahrein. The authors of the chapters on Morocco, Jordan and Bahrein stress that the demonstrations of 2011 should be put in a wider context in which the regimes were making tentative attempts towards some reforms. In all three countries, the decade
preceding the events of 2011 can be characterised as a decade of political overtures. Although some of these reforms were modest, they created an environment in which the opposition could be present. However, whereas in Bahrein the monarchy resorted finally to the forceful repression of the demonstrations, that was not the case in Jordan, while in Morocco the King made substantial concessions in the constitution approved in 2011. As a matter of fact, Jean-Noël Ferrié observes that the reform of despotism attempted by the Moroccan regime through the constitution stumbled on the resistance of what he referred to – quoting Condorc – as indirect despotism, deeply rooted in the very conservative Moroccan society, and he explored the examples of the debate on the death penalty and the one on the freedom of faith to make his point.

The fourth and last part of the book deals with what it refers to as the transformation of the political spaces, and thereby provides one of the main strengths of the edited volume. It begins with an eye-opening chapter by Baudouin Dupret on the importance and the use of Sharia. He underlines the full complexity of the debate on the issue as he states that the central reference to Sharia in the different movements of 2011 and its aftermath do not necessarily mean the same thing or translate in similar political or juridical terms. According to him, Sharia is sometimes resorted to in institutional terms, sometimes in electoral terms, and sometimes just as a way for the opposition to protest against the regime in place. In the post 2011 constitutions of the Arab world, Sharia was often directly mentioned but rarely the main source of writing or even inspiring the new fundamental texts. The following chapters on Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt and Lebanon all emphasise the depth and complexity of the evolution that characterised each one of the political spaces in these countries, as well as their long enduring contours. Vincent Geisser, for instance, rejects any Lebanese exception and explores how, away from any victimisation that is often mentioned regarding Lebanese political actors, both Hezbollah and all the other Lebanese political players use and abuse the Syrian crisis for their own positioning and interest both in the region and in domestic terms.

One of the relative weaknesses of the edited volume by Camau and Vairel is linked to one of its main strengths. Each chapter is very rich in detail and reflects the complexity of each one of the themes, or more often, the countries discussed. However, and despite the fact that several authors reject any ‘exceptionalism’ (be it Moroccan, Jordanian, Bahraini, Lebanese or anyone else), all of them insist on the importance of understanding the minutiae of each situation and of escaping empty and very often void generalisations. By doing so, the reader has to deal with each Arab country and each development as a fully complex and autonomous one, and general rules and models are hard to establish. However, after reading the book, the question still remains: what does this tell us about the region as a whole? What, in terms of social sciences, can we learn from the events of 2011 and beyond in the Arab world? Are there any commonalities with similar events in other regions of the world, or with events of the past in the same region, such as the post-1979 fall of the Shah of Iran and the unrest that followed it in several countries of the region? The overwhelming richness of the chapters does not allow the reader, as it did not allow the editors either, to reach any significant conclusion.

My second remark goes in the totally opposite direction from the first one, although it is in total agreement with what the book tries to do. Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco –in this order- are very present in the book, whereas Yemen, Syria
and Libya, which have been the main source of political instability in the region, although not absent from the book, are however not fully explored and analysed, and the violence that has characterised these three countries is almost absent from the book. These are justifiable editorial choices, and it could also be argued that in 2012, when the first meeting of the different contributors took place, the extent of the impact of the tragedies resulting from Syria and Libya might not have been as evident as they are today, but some chapters on other countries make clear references to the violence in Syria and Libya, which makes me think that those two cases might have been very relevant to explore more in depth.

Finally, the question of referring to an ‘Arab world’ remains. Is this generalisation meaningful? Does it make sense? One could argue that what these countries share is a similar language and a common religion (with all the versions that this might mean), but there are several countries around the world that share, for instance, Portuguese as a language and Christianity as a religion, but no one speaks of a Lusophone world. If one admits that speaking of an Arab world is a political statement, how significant is that statement? My guess – should I say ‘hypothesis’? – is that this is why it is important to deal with the details of each situation and it is challenging to draw general conclusions and models that can provide comprehensive frameworks of explanation for the whole region.