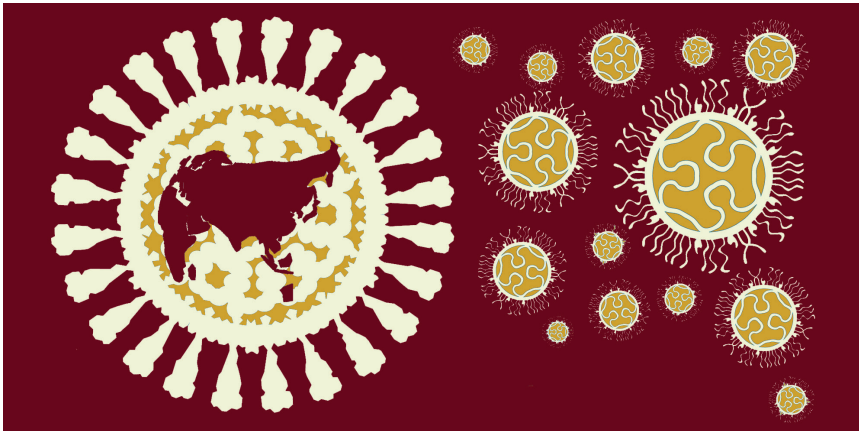# The COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and Africa

Societal Implications, Narratives on Media, Political Issues

edited by
Giorgio Milanetti, Marina Miranda, Marina Morbiducci

VOLUME II – SOCIETY AND INSTITUTIONS

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In copertina | *Cover image*: Reworked Graphic of "Virus Snowflakes". Courtesy of Edward Hutchinson /
MRC-University of Glasgow Centre for Virus Research.

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2. Authoritarianism Goes Pandemic? Symptoms from the Arab Region in the COVID-19 Era

Laura Guazzone

Abstract

Has the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a pre-existing global drive toward expanding, consolidating, and renewing authoritarian regimes worldwide? The study analyses evidence coming from the 20 countries of the Arab region in the 2020-2022 period and interprets this evidence in the framework of the region's political and socio-economic contemporary history. Regional aggregated data and country-by-country analysis show that the political effects of the COVID-19 crisis have overall enabled incumbent authoritarian Arab regimes to reinforce their grip on weakened but untamed societies. Thus the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced authoritarian practices in Arab MENA countries and contributed to global authoritarianism.

Keywords: Arab countries; COVID-19; Authoritarianism; Social inequalities; Populism.

2.1. Authoritarianism and COVID Responses

The present study examines the hypothesis that the political effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated a pre-existing global drive toward the expansion, consolidation and renewal of authoritarian regimes (Lührmann; Lindberg 2019). In this context, the study analyses evidence in support of the starting hypothesis coming from the 20 countries of the Arab MENA region[1] in the 2020-2022 period and interprets this evidence

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[1]   The Arab MENA region comprises 20 countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt,

in the framework of the political and socio-economic contemporary history of the region.

Research centres specialised in monitoring democracy status worldwide – such as the US Freedom House or the Swedish IDEA (IDEA 2022; Repucci, Slipowitz 2020; 2021), as well as an array of scholarly publications, have confirmed that State responses to COVID-19, namely freedom restrictions adopted to hinder the spread of the virus – such as lockdowns, curfews, and state of emergency – have led to widespread violations of democratic standards in all types of political regimes worldwide (Abouzzohour 2022; Edgell et al. 2021).

Analyses of the political effects of the pandemic renewed scholarly interest in the global drive towards authoritarianism that had been perceived in Western academia since the second decade of the 21st century (Diamond et al. 2016; Lührmann, Lindberg 2019) and led to re-conceptualize this swing as a "backsliding" of democracy *also* because of COVID-19 (V-Dem Institute 2020a; 2020b; Skaaning 2020).

However, it remains unclear whether there is a direct link between political regime type and the type of State responses to COVID-19 and its effects (Greer et al. 2021, pp. 617-618; Powers, Rayner 2021). For instance, some scholars argue that while some authoritarian countries tended to have lower COVID-19 deaths than their democratic counterparts in 2020 (before vaccination was available), the key determinant for this difference was higher testing capacity and not more coercive interventions (Annaka 2021).

Most importantly, State's responses to COVID-19 were first dependent on each country's model and capabilities for social policies, i.e., policies implemented to meet social needs for education, health, labour, and economic security. While the different models of social policies – community-based, redistributive, or productivist – depend on politics and economics as well as on culture (Lin, Chan 2015), the ability to implement any given model depends on the State's institutional efficiency and architecture (e.g., centralism vs regionalism), but most notably on the State's economic strength.

Evidence of that is that most countries – including Arab ones – used non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) – such as masking or business closures – to tamp down the initial wave of the pandemic in 2020

Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

when vaccination was not yet available. However, during the subsequent waves, only high-income countries could sustain the ability to pay their citizens to stay home and their businesses to stay closed. The result was a tendency in many lower- and middle-income countries to one-time lockdowns, with drastic impositions of NPIs that did not require sophisticated public administration and enforcement, followed by a reduction of NPIs and resurgent infections (Greer et al. 2021, pp. 617-618). The Arab countries were no exception to this rule, and the most sweeping political effects of the pandemic materialised after the first wave vaned, as will be detailed in what follows (see par. 2.5).

2.2. The Pandemic and Its Evolution in the Arab Middle East and North Africa Region

The socio-political situation of the countries of the Arab Middle East and North Africa region (henceforth: Arab MENA region) was already bleak before the pandemic. Since the 1990s, years of neo-liberal reforms have hard-hit Arab MENA countries' socio-economic conditions. By the first decades of the 21st century, the Arab MENA countries' policies of structural adjustments and privatisations of State economies had led to an ever-increasing poor stratum, a shrinking middle class, declining state services, crony capitalism, and the emergence of a minority of super-rich. Growing widespread frustration with this increasingly untenable situation came to a head in 2011 with the outbreak of popular Arab uprisings of the so-called "Arab Spring" in 2011-2012, demanding dignity, bread, and freedom for all (Haniyeh 2013).

As a result of the uprising, dictators fell in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen. However, their successors, or those who managed to stay in power, engineered a counter-wave of authoritarian renewal with the strong support of competing regional powers: Iran, Turkey and the oil-rich Peninsula countries (Allinson 2022). The international powers either ignored or exploited the conflicts and instability ensuing from these counter-revolutions, thus contributing to the war devastation experienced in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. The regressive circumstances generated by armed conflict and authoritarian renewal created political and socio-economic conditions direr than in 2011, so much so that since 2019 popular protests have been rising again in many Arab MENA countries and most prominently in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian Occupied Territories, Sudan, and Tunisia.

Given this pre-existing political context, it was very likely that the COVID-19 pandemic would have generated a perfect storm in the MENA, allowing for further authoritarian reinforcement, further impoverishment, and further weakening of civil society. And the predictability of this outcome was even more forcefully rooted in the pre-pandemic socio-economic weaknesses and inequalities of the Arab MENA countries.

As argued above, how the Arab States dealt with the pandemic reflected their diverse pre-COVID development contexts more than their political systems (UNDP 2022). In effect, regional capabilities range significantly: from the high–income oil-producing Peninsula countries, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, to middle-income countries, such as Jordan and Morocco, and low-income countries, which include most of the conflict-affected countries, such as Yemen and Syria. Thus, between-country income inequality in the Arab region is the highest in the world, with an average per capita GDP in current terms ranging from less than $500 in Somalia and Sudan to about $50,000 in Qatar. Also, domestically, i.e. within countries, the Arab States have some of the highest income inequalities in the world, with the top 10% of people in some countries accounting for almost 60% of pre-tax national income (World Bank 2020).

In 2019, just before the pandemic, about 29% of people in the Arab States were estimated to be poor, as defined by national poverty lines. Averages, however, hide details. The national poverty rate in Egypt rose from 25.2% during 2005–2010 to 32.5% during 2011-2017. Moreover, national poverty ratios increased dramatically in conflict-ridden countries such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen over the same period.

On top of all this, conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen have led to waves of human displacement, with 58% of the world's refugees now originating from the Arab region. Some 55.7 million people, including 26 million refugees and internally displaced persons, need humanitarian assistance. In this context, the Arab States struggled with high health inequality even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Many Arab countries had weak and fragmented healthcare systems, creating disparities in life expectancy and health outcomes. Within countries, it was often a patchwork of public and private providers, nongovernmental organisations, and military agencies that delivered health services.

Therefore, the impact of the pandemic on socio-economic inequality percolated through its many dimensions that reinforce one another, such as production sectors; region; gender; and vulnerable groups. Thus, it is not surprising that according to UNDP, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted all five dimensions of human development in the Arab MENA region: health, education, income, human agency and freedoms, and environment (UNDP 2022).

As elsewhere, in the beginning, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the MENA countries were difficult to predict. When the virus swept through the world in early 2020, it was unclear whether it would destroy mostly weak Arab health systems and lead to uncontrollable virus spread and mass death. As we now know, the virus struck first and harder in the most developed regions in China, Europe and the US. Nevertheless, it was already clear that the Arab world would not be spared the worst effects of the coronavirus pandemic. In contrast to Iran – a non-Arab MENA country – the Arab region recorded relatively few COVID-19 infections in the first wave of the pandemic in the first semester of 2020. While Iran had nearly 25,000 confirmed cases, Arab countries only reported less than 4,000 combined infections as of March 24, 2020.[2]

However, by early June 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic had caused about 13 million officially reported cases in the MENA region and about 170,000 reported deaths. Regional averages were lower than the world average. However, the rates per million people ranged widely from country to country: from 380 officially reported cases in Yemen to 324,000 in Bahrain (against a global average of almost 69,000) and from 69 officially reported deaths per million in Yemen to 2,376 in Tunisia (compared with a global average of 811). Overall, these discrepancies seem to depend mainly on the inability (or unwillingness) of some Arab countries to build reliable statistics on infection.

On the whole, the Arab region has underperformed on the vaccination rate, with a regional average lower than the global one and a wide range from a mere 1.4% of the population fully vaccinated in Yemen up to 97% in the United Arab Emirates (against a global average of 60%).

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[2]   Unless differently specified, all data in this section are from UNDP 2022 or this author's elaboration on data from "Our World in Data. Coronavirus Pandemic", available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus#explore-the-global-situation> (last accessed 13 March 2023).

As elsewhere in the world, Arab States' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic varied over time and place. Nevertheless, the response to the pandemic confirmed the extreme variation in State capacity across the region, "more than almost any single event in memory" (Lynch 2022, p. 5). High-income, high-capacity states such as the UAE and Qatar – like Israel, another non-Arab MENA country – have been at the forefront of vaccinations, lockdowns, and contact tracing. While relatively high capacity but low-income Arab States, such as Jordan and Morocco, managed to impose lockdowns and curfews but could not economically shield families and businesses and sustain vaccination campaigns.

Lower-capacity Arab States proved unable – or unwilling – to count the number of cases. At the pandemic's beginning, the Egyptian authorities, for example, brushed off reporting that the coronavirus had arrived in Egypt as "fake rumours". Then, displaying a marked lack of transparency, the Egyptian government downplayed a COVID-19 outbreak on a Nile River cruise that reportedly accounted for dozens of instances. Later, the government came to acknowledge the spread of the virus within its borders. However, as of March 2020, official claims continued to belittle the number of confirmed infections in the country. A report even suggests that, at the time, the actual death count in Egypt was 12 times the officially reported numbers (Walsh 2020). Many other Arab (and non-Arab) regimes have first concealed the virus's spread in their country. However, in the war-ravaged Arab countries – Libya, Syria, and Yemen – local authorities did not have the resources or capacity to test potential patients, let alone to produce an accurate tally of cases nationwide.

To conclude this survey of the evolution of the pandemic in Arab MENA countries, we note that development in waves of COVID-19 was not substantially different from global patterns. However, in the vaccination campaigns, high-capacity countries – such as the UAE – positioned themselves in the top global rank, while the rest dramatically lagged behind[3].

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[3]   For further reference, please refer to the website "Our World in Data. Coronavirus Pandemic" available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus#explore-the-global-situation> (last accessed 13 March 2023).

2.3. The Political Effects of the Pandemic in the Arab MENA Region

First of all, it must be stressed that for multiple and complex historical reasons – including colonially distorted development and economic dependence – authoritarianism has been a structural feature in the contemporary political history of the Arab region (Jebnoun et al. 2014). Then, it is to be taken into account that, as mentioned before, there was a widespread authoritarian backlash to the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings that consolidated itself in various ways and places in the 2013-2019 period (Allinson 2022). Thus, before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the near totality of the political regimes of the Arab countries were classified as "not free" by think tanks specialising in monitoring democracy, such as Freedom House and others. In 2019 three Arab countries ranked as "partly free" – Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait; and only one – Tunisia – was classified as "free", according to the House, whose methodology focuses on electoral democracy (Repucci, Slipowitz 2020).

In the 2020-2022 period considered here, the COVID-19 crisis had multifaceted and multidimensional political effects on the post-Arab Spring authoritarian renewal in the Arab region (Lynch 2022). In what follows, our analysis concentrates on a survey of some of the most relevant effects of the pandemic in the political field and namely on: the renewed failure of Arab regionalism; the freezing of popular mobilisations; the changes in regimes' legitimating narratives; the hardening of authoritarian renewal; and, finally, the reversal of the democratisation process that had started since 2011 in Tunisia.

2.3.1. The Renewed Failure of Arab Regionalism and the Halt to Anti-Regime Popular Mobilisations

Given our focus on the Arab MENA as a region, it is interesting to enquire about the political effects of COVID-19 on Arab regionalism before turning to unbundle and interpret the main political effects of COVID-19 that have emerged at the domestic level in the Arab MENA countries. Arab regionalism has a long history that dates to the beginning of the 20th century when a pan-Arab national identity was formed based on perceived shared linguistic, cultural, and historical roots. Arab regionalism was later institutionalised, first with the establishment of the League of the Arab States in 1945 and then with the

creation of sub-regional inter-governmental organisations such as the Union du Maghreb Arabe (UMA) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in the 1980s.

In the first two decades of the 21st century, the activity of Arab regional institutions has rarely been effective, with the relative exception of the GCC. However, Arab regional institutions do exist, and better cooperation towards a common challenge such as a pandemic could have been expected. In effect, there have been examples of relatively successful cooperation in the Global South, as in the case of the African Union (AU), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), and the Central American Integration System (SICA) (Oloruntoba 2021; Ruano, Saltalamacchia 2021).

As elsewhere in the world, the Arab States' initial response to the emergencies caused by the pandemic was to adopt unilateral national measures that aimed to protect the individual State and its citizens. Soon, however, the pandemic started to test the capacity of individual States, and inter-State cooperation seemed one of the possible ways to ease the crisis. Nevertheless, when the pandemic exploded, the Arab League, the main Arab regional organisation, was weakened by deep political divisions and stalemated because of the post-Arab Spring conflicts and confrontations between competing regional hegemons (e.g., Saudi Arabia vs Iran) and their alliances in the region.

Namely, inter-Arab divisions related to the normalisation of relations with Israel culminated in the "Abraham Accords" of the summer of 2020 (Ma'oz 2022). Another critical issue was the return of Syria to the organisation after the suspension of the Syrian regime in 2011 because of the military repression of its protesting population. Recurring bilateral problems between Algeria and Morocco and the internationalised civil war in Libya added to inter-Arab and inter-regional disputes. All these contentious issues and conflicts prevented the Arab League from even attempting a coordinated effort against the pandemic and condemned the organisation to inaction.

The Arab Maghrib Union (AMU), too, suffered from a renewed rivalry between Morocco and Algeria and the prolonged conflict in Libya sustained by international interventions in the civil war that erupted after the fall of the Ghaddafi regime in 2011. Even the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), generally considered the most successful example of regional cooperation in the MENA, went through a deep crisis when, in 2014, Qatar's foreign policies – and namely its support

for the Muslim Brotherhood across the MENA region – put it in an open power struggle with Saudi Arabia and the other GCC member countries, which embargoed all relations with Qatar until 2021, *de facto* stalling GCC cooperation.

By contrast, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)[4] has been relatively active against the pandemic. Although the OIC is not a typical regional organisation, its inclusion in this survey is important as it is the only organisation that includes the Arab region but goes widely beyond it and represents an original kind of cultural-related region. The OIC has actively promoted sharing information and scientific cooperation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic among its member States. Most interestingly, the OIC provided humanitarian and medical assistance in the Arab MENA region, including to the Occupied Palestinian Territories (Altunişik 2022, p. 19).

Summing up, Arab regional institutions seem to have lost the occasion to respond significantly to the enormous challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in the Arab MENA region, thus confirming their inability to live up to the historical ambitions of Arab nationalism (Choueiri 2000).

Taking now a different perspective, it is also important to consider that because of COVID-19, since early 2020, at the domestic level, Arab regimes have adopted health security measures that included bans on public demonstrations. Those restrictions on the freedom of movement severely curtailed or extinguished the popular mass mobilisation that had erupted in 2019 in a few Arab countries that had remained almost untouched by the Arab spring uprisings, namely Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon.

In Algeria, the *Hirak* (movement) anti-regime protests that began in March 2019 were paralyzed because of the COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020. Frustration with the government did not dematerialise with the inability to protest safely. However, as elsewhere in the world and in the region, Algerian public opinion concerns temporarily shifted elsewhere. In the summer of 2020, most Algerians said COVID-19 was a more significant challenge than the economic situation, but by Spring 2021, concern about the economy again overtook concern about

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[4]   The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), established in 1969, is the second largest international organisation after the United Nations, with a membership of 57 Muslim States spread over four continents.

COVID-19 and the dire economic situation remained largely attributed to the political regime failures ("Arab Barometer" 2022a)[5].

Something similar happened in Iraq where the 2019 *Tishreen* uprising – named for the month it began (October: *Tishreen al-Awl*) – expressed years of pent-up frustrations among Iraqi citizens 16 years after the fall of Saddam's regime. The early protest demonstrations triggered a massive repressive response from Iraq's political establishment, perpetrated by official State security forces but also by non-State repressive agents, like thugs and militias, called on by regime elites to undertake incredibly violent crackdowns. However, these repressive responses backfired. The more the political establishment cracked down on protests, the more outrage it triggered, resulting in fresh mobilisations, especially among Iraqi youth ("Arab Barometer" 2022b).

Both in Algeria and Iraq, the 2019 wave of popular protests had reaped significant political results before COVID-19 restrictions stopped them – namely, the resignation in Algeria of the President of the Republic, one of the few surviving high-ranking veterans of the war of independence against France and, in Iraq, the resignation of the incumbent sectarian government and the call of fresh political elections. However, the mobility restrictions adopted because of COVID-19 steamed protests in both countries, allowed for a severe retreat of reform prospects, and helped an authoritarian renewal which is still holding at the time of writing.

In Lebanon as well, strict anti-COVID-19 lockdown measures implemented since early March 2020 impressed a severe blow to the progression of the so-called "October 17" (2019) uprising, which engendered months of continued mobilisations on a national scale against several government economic initiatives. More broadly, the 2019 widespread protests in Lebanon were against the corruption and inefficiency of the Lebanese sectarian system. Protests in Lebanon did not stop because of the pandemic but underwent a drastic de-escalation. At the same time, implementing anti-COVID-19 measures added a heavy load to the dramatic socio-economic effects of the pre-existing

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[5]   Arab Barometer is "a nonpartisan research network that provides insight into the social, political, and economic attitudes and values of ordinary citizens across the Arab world", available at: <https://www.arabbarometer.org/about/the-arab-barometer/> (last accessed 13 March 2023).

and unfolding economic crises, which underwent a sharp acceleration starting in the spring of 2020[6].

2.3.2. Regimes New Narratives in the Search for Legitimacy

During the COVID-19 emergency, politicians and institutions world-wide largely used nationalistic calls for unity and consensus against the pandemic threat as a mobilising discursive tool. In the Arab MENA countries, too, many governments tried to securitize the COVID-19 pandemic by presenting it as "a war against an invisible enemy" and called for a strong collective nationalist response, using various communicative strategies to reinforce national identity and trust between State and society.

As noted above, Arab MENA countries share a long history of pan-regional Arab nationalism or *qawmiyya*. Peculiar to the Arab MENA is that pan-Arab nationalism – developed since the late 19th century – has co-existed and intertwined in original and specific ways with local patriotism, i.e., nation-State nationalism or *wataniyya* (Choueiri 2000). In this context, nationalism, as a secular ideology, was long considered incompatible with the dynastic and religious-based political legitimacy of most countries of the Arab Peninsula and namely Saudi Arabia. Historically, the Kingdom championed the conservative opposition to revolutionary Arab nationalism, particularly, but not only against Nasser's pan-Arabism of the 1950s and 1960s.

A nationalistic U-turn in Saudi Arabia's legitimating narrative began around 2016 and developed to cement the ascendance to power of Muhammad Bin Salman, officially the prince heir to the throne, but since 2016 the *de facto* ruler of the Kingdom (Alhussein 2019). After COVID-19 struck, the Saudi State's driven response to the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the regime's effort to build a new national identity for the Kingdom (Farouk 2020). This effort represented a real novelty in the regime narrative for countries like Saudi Arabia but also for the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where the legitimacy of the State historically centred on a unique blend of Sunni Islam and dynasty.

In the UAE, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, authorities and State-led media have widely used military-related words

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[6]   On the socio-political and socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon, see Tufaro's chapter in this volume.

to praise initiatives against COVID-19, especially to promote volunteering initiatives among UAE nationals and residents. In effect, in the UAE, too, a nationalistic "re-invention of traditions" had been underway for some time and the regime-led response to the pandemic reinforced it. For instance, when the UAE Volunteers Campaign collaborated with governmental and semi-governmental entities, the private sector, and public benefits associations. In the first month of its launch, the campaign attracted 16,502 individuals, including 9.828 field volunteers and 5.306 medical volunteers, representing more than 126 nationalities residing in the UAE (Ardemagni 2022, p. 34).

Taking a different perspective, we know that many countries in the world, and among them many Arab regimes, tried to boost the image of the State as effectively and actively engaged in combating the contagion. In this context, it is interesting to note that the authorities lined up at the forefront of the struggle against COVID-19 differed from country to country, according to the local leaders' political expediency and requirements.

For instance, in Morocco, King Mohammed VI put himself at the centre of anti-COVID-19 action, thus side-lining the government and the party system. In Egypt, instead, the centre of the scene was left to the ministers of health and interiors, thus shielding President al-Sisi and the military from any failure in the anti-COVID-19 struggle. In Tunisia, as we will detail later, President Kais adopted a strategy of distancing himself from the government's pandemic management, and only after his power grab of July 25, 2021, he took the mantle of saviour of the nation also because of his new and better management of the COVID-19 emergency.

More in general, the COVID-19 health emergency reinforced new arguments worldwide about the "advantage" of authoritarian regimes as guarantors of stability and security in the face of the pandemic. In this context, it deserves attention to the narrative supported by some Arab regimes on China's rise and role in international relations. In Egypt, for instance, right before the eruption of the pandemic, the regime's narrative already categorised China as a fair world power and Egypt as a mid-level power within the existing international system (Ehteshami, Horesh 2019). Then, it argued that it was logical for the Egyptian regime to agree on China taking the lead in the global economy, development, and security because that helped Egypt maintain its sovereignty and independence (Rasheed 2021). However, this regime discourse and the

vaunted Chinese success in dealing with the first wave of the pandemic do not seem to have significantly improved the Arab popular perception of the Chinese system ("Arab Barometer" 2021).

2.3.3. Hardening of Authoritarian Renewal and the Reversal of the Democratisation Process in Tunisia

As argued before, in most Arab countries, COVID-19-related restrictions have further hardened the denial of essential social, political, and human rights: freedom of expression and the right to health were the most hit everywhere in the region (UNDP 2022).

In Egypt, the authoritarian renewal had begun on the heels of the Arab Spring mobilisation, when in July 2013, a military *coup d'état* deposed the first democratically elected Egyptian President, Muhammad Morsi, paving the way for the consolidation of a new authoritarian regime of the personal type led by the now President and former General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (Williamson 2021).

As mentioned, despite its early attempts to cover up the number of infections, the Egyptian government eventually followed the World Health Organisation's guidelines on handling and containing the health crisis. The Egyptian government shut down schools and universities, imposed a night-time curfew supervised by police patrols, and announced an investment of 1 billion Egyptian pounds in health services. Nevertheless, decades of under-investment left the public health sector struggling to function, with many hospitals and health centres depending on private donations.

Al-Sisi's regime attempted to divert attention from the COVID-19 crisis by curtailing freedom of expression and accusing its political opponents of spreading disinformation. Conscious of political risks, the regime appeared concerned with hiding the actual extent of the crisis and silenced those who tried to spread the truth about the virus. Heavy restrictions on media and freedom of speech were two of the main tools that allowed the Egyptian and other Arab authoritarian regimes to be as resilient as they were despite the COVID-19 pandemic (Ardovini 2020).

According to Human Rights Watch (2021): "Egyptian authorities intensified their repression of peaceful government critics and ordinary people during 2020, virtually obliterating any space for peaceful assembly, association or expression". Human Rights Watch also noted that as

part of a cosmetic campaign to conceal the country's appalling human rights record in October 2021, President al-Sisi lifted the national State of emergency, which had been in place since April 2017. Nevertheless, within a few days, parliament approved legislative changes, expanding military courts' jurisdiction over civilians, eroding fair trial guarantees, and criminalising reporting on the military, which perpetuated the state of emergency under a new guise (Human Rights Watch 2021).

A very similar evolution happened in Jordan. In the spring of 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan stood out for its response to the COVID-19 pandemic which appeared more robust than in other Arab MENA countries. Jordan's high coercive capacity was at the heart of this early response. With the police and military strategically controlling population movement early on, the State played to its martial strengths to compensate for long-standing deficiencies in other realms of State capacity (Parker-Magyar 2020). The prominent role of the coercive apparatus in formulating and implementing COVID-19 management also underscored the marginalisation of the bureaucrats and other civil institutions.

In 2020, Jordan's status in the Freedom House index declined from "Partly Free" to "Not Free" due to harsh new restrictions on freedom of assembly, a crackdown on the teachers' union that followed a series of strikes and protests, and a lack of adequate preparations that harmed the quality of parliamentary elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, in March 2022, the Jordanian parliament adopted a set of constitutional amendments that further concentrated the King's power within the executive branch. Jordanians, especially the youth who represent two-thirds of the population, lost their confidence in all political establishments, whether governmental, legislative, or judicial.

In this regional context, the most transformative effect of COVID-19 on authoritarianism in the Arab MENA happened in Tunisia. At the beginning of 2020, this medium-sized North African country was still dubbed as the only success story of the Arab Spring of 2011 because of its appearing ongoing democratisation process (Grewal 2021b). However, during the pandemic's first two years, 2020-2022, Tunisia's political system underwent a clear involution, going from appearing to be in a vibrant transition to democracy to a speedy fall into a new authoritarian system.

Briefly analysing a series of complex processes, we can see how in Tunisia the COVID-19 pandemic severely amplified the pre-existing systemic deficiencies of the State and facilitated President Kais Said's

consolidation of a new authoritarian regime. The pre-existing deficiencies of the post-revolutionary system did not regard only the sectors most directly affected by the pandemic, such as public health and social welfare. In effect, Tunisia's deeper deficiencies were more structurally embedded in the consociative political system and the enduring dependence on inefficient neo-liberal socio-economic policies, both in the same mindset as the pre-revolutionary regimes of Bourguiba and Bel Ali (Fulco, Giampaolo 2023, pp. 5-11).

This continuity under a new guise of the socio-political and socio-economic fragilities of Tunisia's State and society is the more profound explanation for the renewal of authoritarianism in the country, which has been sustained by deep popular dissatisfaction with post-revolutionary party politics and socio-economic policies, as shown by the persistence of street protests that remained unabated since 2011, especially in the most deprived central-western Tunisian provinces. In effect since 2008, the global financial and economic crisis had become rapidly evident in Tunisia and income inequalities had grown rapidly in the North African country and income polarisation has not changed significantly after the Arab Spring of 2011.

In the political realm, it is to be noted that from 2014 to 2020 in Tunisia, there were five governments made up of different political coalitions: consensual politics reassured international lenders but generated decision-making stalemates that failed to address the growing social inequality and regional disparities.

This situation generated rising popular discontent towards the traditional political forces, culminating with the 2019 presidential election, which saw the victory of an "anti-political" candidate: Kais Saied, who won 72% of the votes. A university teacher of constitutional law and an outsider of the party system, Saied's electoral programme promised – without details – to restore people's power in politics under the beloved Arab Spring revolutionary slogan: "The people want" (*al-sha'b yurid*). No substantial economic policy changes occurred during Said's first year in the presidency.

In this context, it is unsurprising that the explosion of the pandemic, its institutional management, and popular reaction to both clearly accelerated the exacerbation of Tunisia's pre-existing political and socio-economic impasse. In effect, Tunisia's pre-existing socio-economic and socio-economic crisis was severely exacerbated since March 2020 by the movement restrictions imposed because of the pandemic (general lockdowns and

curfews) and their economic consequences, which led to a sharp decrease in per capita income of approximately 12% that hit harder the medium and the poorer strata of the population.

After the relative success in containing the relatively mild first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, during the second pandemic wave in the first semester of 2021, Tunisia was one of the most affected countries in the world for the number of infections and deaths and reported the highest mortality rate per capita in Africa (Khadhraoui, Ben Hamadi 2021)[7]. In the first months of 2021, scared and enraged youth people all around the country, especially in the deprived central-western regions, went back in force to protest – in violation of the existing lockdown and curfews – against the government's inability to contrast the economic crisis and the pandemic. These protests were met with increasingly violent police repression.

In this widespread and growing social protest context, Tunisian people seemed to attribute the worsening of the socio-economic situation to the political deadlock between the incumbent government and the parliament and not to the President, who remained highly popular. In effect, President Saied had distanced himself from his country's government so that the blame game over who should bear the responsibility for the mismanagement of the pandemic, the harsh police repression of protests and the low start of the vaccination drive would fall on the government, thus exacerbating the simmering tensions within the government of the Islamist-supported Prime Minister Mechichi.

On July 20, 2021, the Ministry of Public Health, Mehdi, was sacked by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Social Affairs, Trabelsi, was appointed in the interim. Nevertheless, on July 25, a new and massive protest erupted throughout the country, mainly directed against the government's mismanagement of the crisis. On the same day, President Kais Saied froze the parliament, dismissed the Prime Minister, and announced he would temporarily rule by decree.

In doing so, Saied inconsistently (Tamburini 2022) claimed to act based on article 80 of the 2014 constitution, which stated that the President: "in a state of imminent danger threatening the integrity of the country and the country's security and independence, is entitled to

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[7]   For further reference see also the website "Our World in Data. Coronavirus Pandemic", available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus#explore-the-global-situation> (last accessed 13 March 2023).

take the measures necessitated by this exceptional situation". Flanked by military and security officials, Saied also rescinded parliamentary immunity, threatening to subject corrupt parliamentarians to the law "despite their wealth and positions" (Grewal 2021b).

Besides President Saied's populist manipulation of protest, it is evident that given the extent of pre-existing socio-political and socio-economic crises in Tunisia, the government adopted measures to mitigate the pandemic socio-economic effects that were insufficient to prevent social unrest and the collapse of popular trust in State institutions. In a perceptive and well-documented article, Cyrine Ghannouchi details how the intersecting between the pandemic emergency, populist and consociative politics and the pre-existing systemic fragilities, has led to the collapse of the already faltering democratic transition in Tunisia (Ghannouchi 2021).

At the beginning of 2022, popular rage in Tunisia was still mainly directed against the corruption and incapability of the government and the parliament to deal with the overwhelming economic and health crisis; this widespread lack of confidence in the state institutions and parliamentary politics was due to the pre-existing disaffection with party politics that matured in the 2014-2019 period.

The fact that the State responded to the protests with highly repressive and coercive measures added to popular frustration and reinforced the populist drive already embodied by President Saied, whose popularity continued to hold well despite Tunisia's spiralling descent into complete dictatorship after Saied's 2021 power grab described above ("Arab Barometer" 2022c). In effect, renewed authoritarianism in Tunisia has taken a specific populist form, centred on President Kais Saied, first elected in 2019. After President Kais Said's' constitutional "power grab" of July 2021, his new populist authoritarian regime was reinforced – despite a record low voter turnout – first by the ratification in August 2022 of a new constitution concentrating power on the President and then the election in January 2023 of a new parliament of "independents" with much-reduced powers.

2.4. Conclusions

Our survey of the Arab MENA region's socio-political experience during 2020-2022, the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, shows that the effects of the health and socio-economic emergency on

the political institutions and practices of Arab MENA countries have overall enabled incumbent authoritarian regimes to reinforce their grip on weakened but resilient societies.

This comprehensive reinforcement – or restoration, as in the case of Tunisia – of the authoritarianism of the Arab political regimes was definitely not the result of an unforeseen political tsunami triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which overwhelmed Arab States' capabilities, leaders' credibility or societal resilience. Quite to the contrary, our analysis stresses first that how the Arab States dealt with the pandemic reflected their diverse pre-COVID-19 development contexts – marked by world-record high inequalities – more than their political systems.

Secondly, our analysis shows that while authoritarianism has been a structural feature in the entire contemporary political history of the Arab region, there was a widespread authoritarian backlash to the 2011 Arab spring uprisings that had consolidated itself in various ways and places in the 2013-2019 period. However, this article also surveys how several Arab societies resisted authoritarian renewal with widespread waves of popular mobilizations in 2019. Thus, before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the near totality of the political regimes of the Arab countries was already classified as "not free" and popular mobilizations were fighting against authoritarianism, namely because of its reinforcing effects on socio-economic inequalities.

However, the COVID-19 health emergency and its socio-economic effects helped authoritarian regimes wipe away their formally semi-liberal features – functioning parliaments, courts, parties, independent media and NGOs. Previous to the pandemic, these semi-liberal features still allowed considering some Arab regimes, such as Egypt or Jordan, as "hybrid" regimes (Wigell 2008) – a category that still included even Tunisia after 2011 – pushing them towards fully authoritarian species and transforming already authoritarian regimes into harsher and more entrenched ones.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced and multiplied social inequalities in the Arab MENA region, aggravating the deprivation and alienation of the social groups already marginalised because of their class, gender, ethnic and/or confessional identity and geographic location. Our analysis details how the COVID-19 pandemic also helped in further weakening regional cooperation, transformed and emboldened regime narratives on authoritarianism, disrupted the remaining vestiges of transition to democracy in Tunisia and succeeded

in consuming – at least temporarily – the popular ability to resist authoritarian and populist pressures.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic acted in the Arab MENA countries as a multiplier and accelerator of pre-existing systemic deficiencies, reinforcing and legitimising the authoritarian practices of incumbent regimes through various discursive and repressive innovations. Therefore, our analysis of the evidence from the Arab region confirms that the political effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated a pre-existing global drive toward the expansion, consolidation and renewal of authoritarian regimes.

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