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# Strangers in plain sight: conceptions of democracy in EU Neighbourhood Policy and public opinion across North Africa

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## ABSTRACT

We draw innovatively on new and existing public opinion survey data carried out across North African countries since 2011 to provide a ‘view from below’ of the type of democracy that citizens of North African countries want and compare this conception with the type of democracy the European Union (EU) ‘offers’ its counterparts in the ‘Southern Neighbourhood’. This comparison shows there is a mismatch between what citizens want and what the EU is offering. While citizens want a ‘thicker’, socially just democracy, the EU ‘offers’ a market democracy that prioritises a limited number of civil and political rights. Social and economic rights are discursively constructed as macroeconomic issues relevant to the stability and consolidation of democracy rather than human rights as integral to democracy as their civil-political counterparts.

**KEYWORDS** European Union; Arab Spring; European Neighbourhood Policy; democracy; neoliberalism; social and economic rights

## Introduction

This article examines the type of democracy that citizens of North African countries want in order to compare it with the type of democracy the European Union (EU) Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) ‘supplies’. Much of the literature on the EU and its foreign policy towards the region – especially its ‘democracy assistance’ – focuses on analysing the limits of EU democracy promotion or its foreign policy generally, or on regional governments. When the views of people – rather than governments – are considered, this has usually drawn on qualitative interviews with Civil Society (CS) activists or leaders rather than the views of public opinion. This paper provides an additional ‘view from below’ by using findings from public opinion surveys carried

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out across North African countries since 2011, which collect data on citizens' political, economic, and social attitudes.

We build on recent but geographically limited studies (Teti, Abbott, and Cavatorta 2019) to argue there is indeed a 'demand for democracy' across the region. However, it is not the type of democracy on offer from the European Union: while discourse analyses of EU policy and implementation documents shows that it focuses on the formal, procedural aspects of liberal democracy – e.g. regular 'free and fair' elections and related civil–political rights –, survey data suggests citizens *also* think of democracy as 'thicker', more substantive, and delivering social and economic human rights and 'social justice' (Teti et al. 2020).

The mismatch between populations' 'demand for democracy' and the EU's 'supply' is vital in explaining the Union's lack of 'normative power' in its 'Southern Neighbourhood', and helps understand its failure to build a 'ring of friends' there. It also illustrates some root causes of instability in the region: even where countries are apparently stable, they are, in fact, brittle, unstable 'sinkholes of insecurity' (Teti, Abbott, and Cavatorta 2018).

## Methods

The EU 'supply' of democracy has been analysed extensively elsewhere, with discourse analytic approaches showing that despite an ecumenical emphasis on the multiple possible forms of democracy and the 'indivisibility' of human rights, throughout ENP documents, the EU adopts a minimalist, procedural conception of democracy focusing on civil–political rights and on 'free and fair' elections. In contrast, social and economic human rights, in particular, are redefined as matters of (macro) economic policy, not of rights (For a detailed examination of these issues and EU policy towards the region, see Teti et al. 2020).

To examine whether there is a 'demand for democracy' in North African countries and whether populations' conceptions of democracy match the EU's or not, we draw on questions available in public opinion surveys carried out in North Africa since 2010 about what sort of government citizens want. We mainly use the Arab Barometer (AB) carried out in 2010–11 (ABII), 2013 (ABIII), and 2018 (ABV) supplemented by the Arab Transformations survey of 2014 (AT), 2016s ABIV, and the World Values Survey Wave 6 (WVS6) carried out between 2011 and 2014. All are stratified probability surveys allowing generalisations at the national level as they are representative of the adult population 18 years and over.

There is a core set of questions on democracy and human rights in these surveys, though not *all* surveys include *all* such questions. Nor were all countries included in all rounds of these surveys: ABII only included Egypt and Tunisia, ABVI excluded Libya, while AT excluded Algeria. Unless otherwise

indicated, data in the Results section is from ABV, the most recent survey in the region, dating to late 2018.

Surveys were carried out in local languages by experienced local teams using the same questionnaire (for each survey). All participants were asked to give informed consent, and data handling and management procedures were in place to ensure the security of data and safety of both participants and interviewers.

It was impossible to weigh the data to correct for accidental over- or under-sampling because of the lack of recent and accurate population data/estimates for all countries. We, therefore, used unweighted data, relying on the design of survey samples to ensure samples represented the populations they were drawn from.

### ***The usefulness of surveys and questions of data quality***

In middle- and low-income countries, survey quality is generally considered good enough to measure national-level subjective orientations (Inglehart and Welzel 2010). This is not to say surveys do not have limitations or pose particular challenges. Nor should they be used *in place* of other methods.

That said, within those limitations, surveys do provide a broad picture of public opinion in each country, generalisable at the national level, in a way difficult to replicate. They furnish important insights into citizens' attitudes to democracy and human rights in the five countries in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings and enable us to compare citizens' understanding of what democracy is with what is being offered by the EU in its foreign policy to the region.

We also accounted for two common data-quality issues. One involves identifying cases where there was a possibility of fraud by either duplication/near-duplication (excessive similarity in questionnaires) or by random completion (excessive variance). We used PercentMatch to identify and excluded the former and developed a new application of PercentMatch to detect the latter (Kuriakose and Robbins 2016; Abbott et al. 2017). The second issue regards the treatment of 'do not know' and 'refused' answers. Usually, these answers are excluded on the basis that only data providing a 'substantive' response should be used. However, we include these responses – when these could be considered valid responses – for several reasons. First, data collectors are trained to encourage respondents to give a substantive response and instructed *not* to read out 'do not know' and 'refused' as options; thus, respondents must be genuinely determined *not* to select from the options offered, suggesting none of those options approximates their preferences. Second, these responses are noticeable on some questions about democracy and preferences of political system across the surveys, and also vary significantly by country and question. Whatever the reason for the 'do not know' responses, if they are discounted, then the proportions of

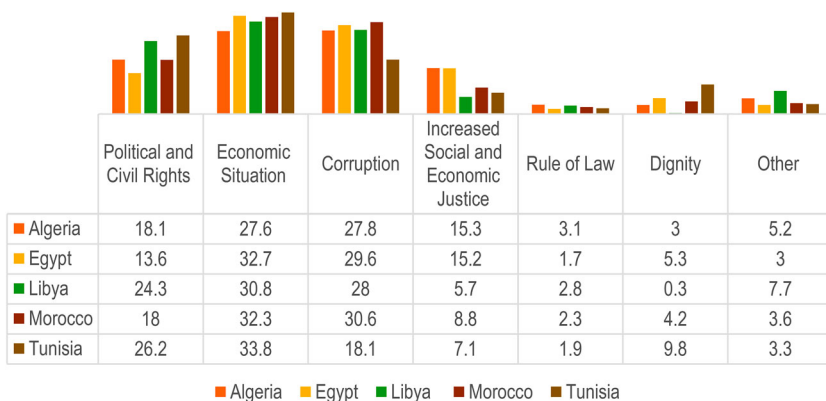
respondents who support democracy – or another regime type – will almost certainly be *overestimated*. Finally, excluding such responses assumes that they are distributed randomly across the population, which is unlikely (Bersinsky and Tucker 2006). Thus, such exclusion would likely skew results.

We have followed the usual convention of combining ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ responses as indicating support, although this may not adequately measure the degree of commitment.

Finally, we use mainly descriptive statistics because we are interested in national-level ‘sentiment’ and not differences between groups or the drivers of differences between groups. While there are differences between countries on some variables that are unlikely to be due to chance, in this article, we are concerned with the mismatch between public sentiment and EU policy towards the region. This does not mean that notable differences in attitudes between countries are unimportant – indeed, these differences question the practice by some scholarship of pooling data and presenting findings suggesting that there are common ‘Arab’ attitudes. For example, with respect to gender equality, although compared to other countries worldwide, Arab states tend to cluster, when compared *within* the region, Morocco and Tunisia have significantly more liberal attitudes than other surveyed countries, despite these being more conservative than in European countries (Abbott 2016; Teti et al. 2020).

## Results and analysis: what ‘The people’ want

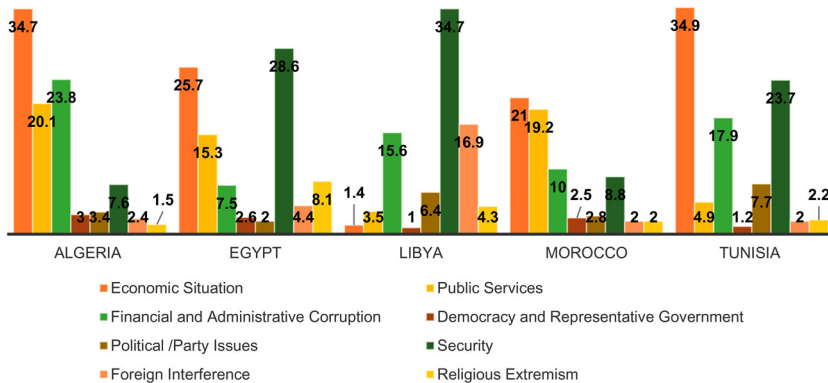
In this section, we examine citizens’ understanding of and attitudes towards democracy across North Africa. To do this, in addition to questions directly related to democracy, we draw on both direct and indirect questions on the type(s) of regime respondents support for their country. (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Two main causes of the uprisings, %. Source: ABIII.

## People's priorities, challenges, and causes of the uprisings

The EU's assumption was – and remains – that what MENA citizens want is democracy understood as *liberal* democracy and human rights understood as a specific subset of civil and political rights. However, survey data consistently challenges this interpretation since at least 2011, when the Arab Barometer collected data shortly after the Uprisings, which showed a mismatch between what people want and what the EU offers (Teti, Abbott, and Cavatorta 2018; Teti et al. 2020). Asked in 2013 what they thought the two main causes of the Uprisings were, the three possible causes most frequently nominated were: their country's economic situation, corruption, and civil and political rights (Figure 2). In Algeria, the proportion nominating the economic situation and corruption were the same, with democracy mentioned less frequently. In Egypt, Libya, and Morocco, the most frequently mentioned challenge was the economic situation, followed by corruption. In Tunisia, the most frequently mentioned was the economic situation followed by political and civil rights. In Algeria and Egypt, 15% nominated social and economic justice, while proportions were much smaller in the other three countries. The Uprisings were partly motivated by a demand for democracy. However, the economic situation and government corruption were considered equally, if not more important. This suggests that the Uprisings were more than a call for *liberal* democracy: they were a call to end a system based on (government) corruption, and for social justice, for economic growth benefiting the middle and working classes, not just elites. This is compatible with social democracy, albeit not identical – but it cannot be reduced to liberal democracy alone.



**Figure 2.** Two most important challenges facing country in 2018, %. Source: ABV.

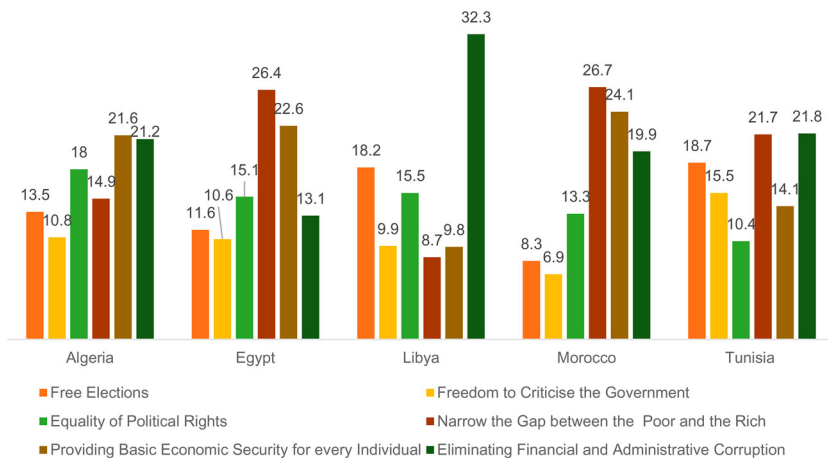
Note: Other: 0.8% Algeria, 3.2% Egypt, 1.5% Libya, 26.8% Morocco, 3.9% Tunisia (no information recorded for 'other'). Missing values: 1.4% Algeria, 5.2% Egypt, 2.3% Libya, 5.6% Morocco 1.0% Tunisia.

Citizens' priorities become even clearer when asked to indicate the two most pressing challenges facing their country: here, since 2011, with the notable exception of Libya, citizens identified the economic situation (poverty, unemployment and price increases) as the main challenge, followed by corruption and then security. In 2013 Libyans most frequently nominated foreign interference (47%) but with corruption (29%) and the economic situation (19%) nominated far more frequently than democracy (4%). In 2018, respondents had more options to select two from, but again except for Libya, the same pattern holds: the economic situation is most frequently nominated, with only a tiny minority nominating 'democracy and representative government' (Figure 3). In Libya, perhaps unsurprisingly, the most frequently mention was security followed by foreign interference and corruption. Only one per cent mentioned democracy.

The main conclusion from an analysis of the responses to the questions on the drivers of the Uprisings and the most serious challenges facing respondents' countries is that while there may be a demand for liberal democracy across North Africa, citizens have more pressing priorities than democracy as a mere institutional design.

### *Democracy in principle*

This conclusion is confirmed by answers to direct questions about the type of political system respondents think is best and what type(s) of political systems are suitable for their respective countries. Survey data since the 2000s consistently shows three things: first, that citizens do not think they live in a democracy; second, that democracy despite its faults is preferred



**Figure 3.** Two most important features of democracy, % Nominated as one of two. Source: ABIII.

to other systems; and third, that support for democracy is not unconditional (Teti, Abbott, and Cavatorta 2018; Teti, Abbott, and Cavatorta 2019).

In 2011, 2013, and 2018 citizens rated their governments as hybrid, clearly indicating they do not believe they live in democracies, whatever the official rhetoric about elections or popular representation might be. In 2013, means on an 11-point scale going from 0 (not a democracy) to 10 (full democracy) ranged from a high of 6.7 in Algeria to a low of 4.5 in Egypt (6.2 in Libya, 5.3 in Tunisia, 5.2 in Morocco).<sup>1</sup> By 2018, the means had dropped, ranging from a high of 5.2 in Egypt to a low of 2.4 in Libya (3.9 in Algeria, 4.1 in Morocco, 4.6 in Tunisia).<sup>2</sup> Especially noteworthy is that citizens in Tunisia – the one country recognised by Western Governments as transitioning to democracy – did not think that their country was a democracy either in 2013 or by 2018.

By contrast, most citizens agree democracy is a better system of government than any alternatives. In 2011, shortly after the Uprisings, 70% of both Egyptians and Tunisians agreed democracy was better than other systems (AB II); in 2013, around 70% of citizens in each country surveyed agreed (AB III); and in 2018, a majority continued to agree democracy was preferable to other systems, ranging from a high of 79% in Tunisia to a low of 62% in Morocco (Table 1).

However, when asked if democracy is *always* preferable to other systems of government, the proportion agreeing fell in all countries, with less than half of citizens in Algeria and Egypt agreeing it was always preferable. This suggests that commitment to democracy is, in some ways, conditional and not absolute.

### ***Characteristics of democracy: form vs substance***

Given that popular support for democracy is likely not unconditional, it is crucial to understand what type of political system citizens want. It is evident from answers to a question asking respondents to nominate the two most important characteristics of democracy North African citizens do not have the same understanding of democracy as the EU's minimalist, 'procedural' conception. Firstly, only a relatively small proportion in each country nominate free and fair elections as an essential characteristic of democracy, varying from a high of 19% in Tunisia to a low of 8% in Morocco in 2013

**Table 1.** Demand for democracy in 2018.

	Algeria	Egypt	Libya	Morocco	Tunisia
% Agree Democracy Better than Other Systems	67.6	73.3	74.1	62.0	79.3
% Agree that Democracy is Always Preferable to Other Systems of Government	40.4	41.9	57.2	53.1	64.4

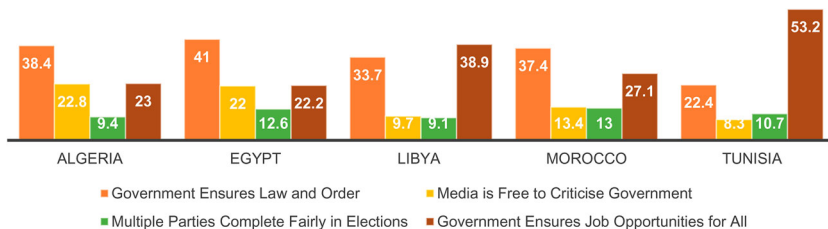
Source: ABV.



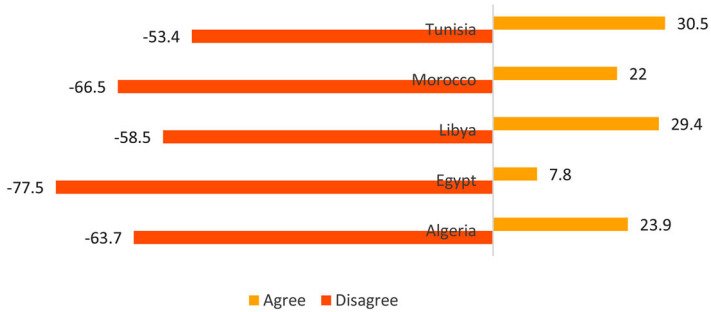
despite a substantial element of EU democracy assistance having been spent on election monitoring, not least in Tunisia and Morocco themselves (Figure 4). Secondly, in every country, eliminating corruption is nominated as an essential characteristic of democracy more frequently than free and fair elections, ranging from 13% in Egypt to 32% in Libya. Thirdly, citizens see economic justice as an essential element of democracy. Comparing the proportion nominating at least one of the three civil and political rights (Algeria 42%, Egypt 37%, Libya 44%, Morocco 29%, Tunisia 45%) and those nominating at least one of the two economic rights (Algeria 37%, Egypt 49%, Libya 19%, Morocco 51%, Tunisia 22%) it is clear that North Africans want social democracy rather than the liberal democracy prompted by the EU in their countries. Indeed, citizens want the decent society the EU claims its policies will bring about, but which the Union has increasingly been failing to provide both internally and in its support for democracy and development – except in those forms supplied through marketised, neoliberal processes which have thoroughly failed over the past several decades, resulting in greater social vulnerability and lower social mobility.

In 2018, the Arab Barometer gave survey participants a different set of options to select one from as the most important characteristic of democracy (Figure 5). Again, respondents do not prioritise free and fair elections or fundamental civil–political rights as the main characteristic of democracy. In all five countries, the government ensuring law and order and ensuring job opportunities for all are equally or more important than free and fair elections or the media being free to criticise the government. Especially notable is that more than half of Tunisians think that the main characteristic of a democracy is to ensure job opportunities for all. This goes some way to explaining why so few Tunisians see their country as a democracy, given that post-2011 unemployment – especially youth unemployment – has remained high, and many of those in employment are in precarious and/or poorly paid jobs.

The answers to the questions on the definition of democracy should not be taken to mean that North African populations do not want free and fair elections or civil and political rights. Rather, taken in the context of other findings, it suggests that respondents want more than just the formal



**Figure 4.** Main characteristic of democracy. Source: ABV.



**Figure 5.** Agree/disagree with the proposition that democracy is incompatible with Islam, %. Source: ABIII.

guarantee of civil–political rights, they also want conditions that enable democracy to function and deliver substantively, including socio-economic rights. A majority of citizens across each country agree a parliamentary system of government where secular and religious political parties can compete is appropriate for their country (Egypt 89%; 88% Morocco; 83% Tunisia; Algeria 81%; Libya 53%) (ABIII). There is also a strong demand for civil and political rights, even though they are not prioritised as highly as socio-economic rights. In 2013, over 80% of citizens across the five countries agreed that political freedoms such as freedom of the press, freedom of expression and freedom to establish associations were important (Algeria 95.4%; Egypt 88.5%; Libya 83.9%; Morocco 86.7%; Tunisia 85.2%) (ABIII). However, there was even stronger support for the constitutions of their countries guaranteeing workers’ rights (Algeria 90%, Egypt 93%, Libya 93%, Morocco 77%, Tunisia 93%) and for guaranteeing social protection and health insurance for the poor (Algeria 89%; Egypt 94%; Libya 94%; Morocco 94%; Tunisia 93%).

### ***Religion, human rights, and democracy***

The democracy the EU champions involves secularism, human rights as set out in UN conventions and the ‘European Social Model’ eclectically woven into a particular self-narrative of emancipation, namely that through a combination of free markets and liberal democracy (Western), European states reforged the post-war Old Continent into a land of peace and prosperity – where these were the result of a combination of social democratic ‘Keynesian’ protectionism, social democracy (welfare states) and the Cold War.

Under the banner of this neoliberalised ‘European Social Model’, however, one also finds ideas and themes related to the role of ‘culture’ in producing this ever closer and more prosperous union – specifically ideas about ‘fundamental values’, the civic-cultural requirements of ‘good governance’ (e.g. the

rule of law, anti-corruption), and secularism. The clearest statement of this construct appears in the first definition of 'deep democracy' given by the Union in 2013, a definition at the heart of the discursive framework through which the EU formulated its response to the Uprisings. In its *New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood*, the Union defines 'deep democracy' as

the kind [of democracy] that lasts because the right to vote is accompanied by rights to exercise free speech, form competing political parties, receive impartial justice from independent judges, security from accountable police and army forces, access to a competent and non-corrupt civil service – and *other* civil and human rights *that many Europeans take for granted*, such as the freedom of *thought, conscience and religion*. (European Commission 2011b, 2 emphasis added)

If the centrality of culture/religion were not clear enough, NRCN specifies that in order to consolidate – i.e. to transform revolt into democratic transition – such deep democracy must be accompanied by a 'commitment to the universal values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law' (European Commission 2011b, 2).

This conception of democracy – found more or less explicitly in subsequent documentation, bilateral Association Agreements as much as strategy documents – is crucial also in reaffirming/reconstructing the Union as a bearer of these values and a 'normative power' willing and able to promote them. However, insofar as the Southern Neighbourhood is expected to accept, adopt and internalise the 'fundamental values' supposedly crucial to democracy, 'inclusive growth' and stability, the ENP's discursive framework effectively constructs the 'Neighbourhood' as the EU's 'culturally' defective/lacking 'Other' in need of being 'normalised', made more like the EU's particular view of (neo)liberal democratic governance (Bicchi 2006; Del Sarto 2016).

Neighbourhood governments adopted and adapted this narrative – including aspects of its culturalised, essentialised alterity –, using it to deflect and diffract demands for democracy, particularly from their populations. Effectively, regimes engaged in a form of Foucaultian counter-conduct designed to neutralise rather than advance democracy (Malmvig 2012, 2014). Malmvig highlights this dynamic in the context of democracy-promotion – e.g. adopting the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam (CDHRI) (Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers 1990) – while others point to Turkey's 'de-Europeanisation' (e.g. Cebeci 2016). Indeed, this mutually adaptive dynamic can be discerned in a broad range of contexts, not least opposition to authoritarian regimes themselves (Camau 2002), and can perhaps help interpret apparently confusing survey responses on the relationship between religion and democracy.

The full implications of the centrality of 'European values' in the EU's construction of the Neighbourhood Policy becomes apparent when one considers popular preferences around religion and politics, which emerge through survey data.

For citizens, religion is undoubtedly important. For example, two-thirds of respondents or more see themselves as religious (Algeria 82%, Egypt 89%, Libya 78%, Morocco 84%, Tunisia 68%) (ABV, 2018). In 2013, respondents also said that their countries' Constitutions should mandate '*shari'a*' as the 'main source of law' (Algeria, 87%; Egypt, 87%; Libya, 89%; Morocco, 84%; Tunisia, 71%) (ABIII), with only around 10% of citizens in Algeria (5.6%) Egypt (7.1%) Libya (11.4%) and Morocco (14.3%) agreeing law should be based '*solely*' on the 'will of the people'. Even in Tunisia, where there has been civil law since the 1950s, this only rises to a quarter. A simplistic analysis might lead to the conclusion that religion has a strong influence on politics and, therefore, on the (possibility of) democracy in the region.

However, probing both responses and their context more closely, the relation between belief and politics appears far from clear, both in its synchronic, contingent articulation and in its relations of causality over time. First, survey designs make it difficult to clarify what precisely the 'demand for religion' entails in the minds of respondents, specifically whether 'Islam' acts as a master signifier into which respondents invest all sorts of different conceptions, grievances and priorities (rather than Islam *per se* being (in)compatible with democracy or not). For example, survey questions on '*shari'a*' or on 'Islam' treat these as though they were monolithic bodies of jurisprudence or theology, even though minimal familiarity with Islamic theology and jurisprudence in theory and practice should put to rest any illusions of homogeneity. Beyond representing a rejection of the secularism which post-colonial populist-nationalist Arab republics rhetorically championed, it is difficult to conclude what kind of 'Islamic' political project respondents favouring '*shari'a*' would support. Not least because supposedly 'secular' Arab regimes often deploy. Rather, these ambiguities appear compatible with a 're-traditionalisation' dynamic: indeed, observers have long noted the influence of the decline of secular Arab nationalism twinned with regional regimes' manipulation of religion to suit their conservative agendas (e.g. Tibi 2008).

Conversely, there is well-accepted literature illustrating the compatibility of 'Political Islam' and democracy – e.g. if religious, political parties agree to compete with secular ones for power (Schwedler 2007, 2011). Moreover, surveys suggest people display significant scepticism towards (current) religious elites, and respondents oppose a role for unelected religious leaders in making or vetting political decisions (see data below). This suggests popular preferences approximate the 'twin tolerances' orthodox scholarship

holds necessary for democracy (Driessen 2018; Cesari 2013; Stepan 2012; Stepan and Linz 2013).

Secondly, closer examinations of survey data on other issues pertaining to the interface between religion and politics suggest citizens display a complex conception of the relationship between religion and democracy. Respondents' support for '*shari'a*', for example, maybe related to what they see as the characteristics of a government driven by such '*shari'a*'. A majority of respondents in each country agree such a government should: provides essential services (varying from a low of 70% in Tunisia to a high of 89% in Egypt) and not be corrupt (ranging from lows of 32% in Algeria and 54% in Tunisia, to 91% in Egypt). It is important to note that these conceptions echo respondents' perceptions of the key challenges and priorities facing their respective countries and were also among the main drivers of support for the 2010–11 Uprisings (ABV). As ABII and AT data show, corruption is consistently among the top issues that respondents perceive as the most critical challenges facing their countries and is the single most important factor driving support for the Uprisings (Teti, Abbott, and Cavatorta 2019).

Moreover, responses on the relationship between religion and politics on other questions suggest it is impossible to infer from support for religious principles an incompatibility between religion and democracy or even resistance to the possibility of democratisation. For example, only a minority of citizens in each country agree that democracy is *incompatible* with democracy, but the proportion agreeing is still, at its lowest, nearly 1 in 10 citizens in Egypt, rising to over 3 in 10 in Tunisia (Figure 6).

Also, while a noticeable proportion of citizens say they trust religious leaders and prefer a religious party, a majority clearly state they do *not* want religious leaders interfering in elections or government decisions. Nor

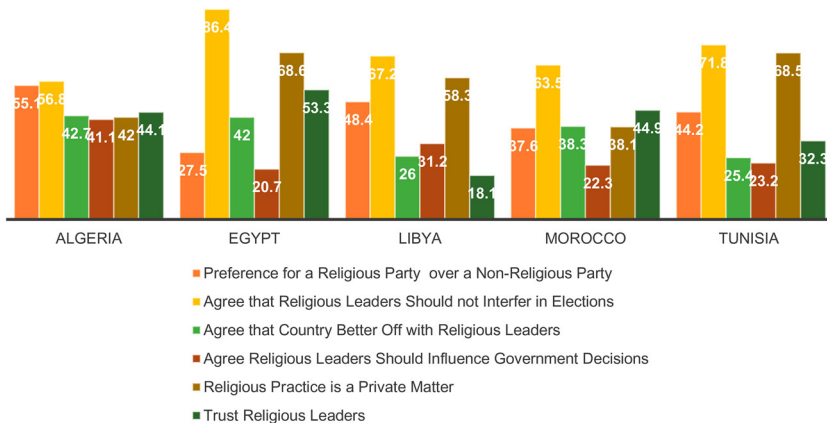


Figure 6. Religion and politics. Source: ABV.

do they believe their countries would be better off with religious leaders (Figure 6). This data confirms it is too simplistic to infer from questions on *'shari'a'* that people want 'religious government' in the sense of a conservative, antidemocratic brand of Islam which emerged as a combined consequence of the failures of post-colonial nationalist governments, of proselytism from private and state actors in the oil-rich Gulf, and of Western governments' dislike of Islamist parties. Indeed, in ABV, only a minority trusted the main Islamist group in their country: 13.7% in Egypt, 8.5% in Libya, 26.1% in Morocco and 17.1% in Tunisia.

An analogous contextualisation is necessary to interpret the levels of societal rejection of equal rights for women, non-Muslims and non-heteronormative values and attitudes. Some studies argue consolidated democracies score highly on adopting these rights and the values and attitudes which go with them, but that North African respondents by and large do not display these 'secular-rational' values or have 'self-expression' attitudes, concluding that people's values and attitudes remain a barrier to democracy (Norris 2015; Inglehart 2010, 2017; Welzel and Inglehart 2008; Rowley and Smith 2009). This approach also suggests that the strong support for at least some law being based on *shari'a* rather than the will of the people is both antithetical to democracy and discriminates against, for example, the rights of women, non-Muslims and non-heterosexual citizens (An-Na'im 2010; Norris 2015; Rowley and Smith 2009).

What this approach risks obfuscating is that these values and attitudes are often not 'traditional', but are relatively recent, invented traditions constructed both by Islamist movements – which, in opposition, gained influence after the decline of the Left in the Arab world – and, as noted above, by Arab regimes themselves. These regimes have sought to shore up their legitimacy with 'tradition' and to strike a new authoritarian bargain with Islamist groups in which their social influence – earned partly by replacing increasingly kleptocratic states in providing essential services like education or health – was allowed in exchange for their political quietism. (Table 2).

### **Discussion: the roots of a 'normatively powerless Europe': diverging conceptions of democracy**

In this section, we consider the broader significance of the data outlined above, both for the question of the popular demand for democracy in North Africa and for the EU's puzzling inability to act on that demand.

#### ***Popular demands and the 'authoritarian impasse' in North Africa***

Before the 'Arab Spring', North African regimes were mostly considered resilient, with little evidence of opposition groups being able to affect

**Table 2:** Attitudes to equal rights.

	Algeria	Egypt	Libya	Morocco	Tunisia
Homosexuality Never Justified, % <sup>1</sup>	93.3	99.9	80.2	93.8	87.2
Only Acceptable Religion My Religion, % <sup>1</sup>	83.0	na	94.8	91.1	87.2
Constitution Mandate Equal Rights for Men and Women, % <sup>2</sup>	70.0	89.0	82.0	87.0	80.0
Family Law Should be Based on shari'a, % <sup>2</sup>	95.0	90.0	97.0	88.0	64.0
Family Law Should be Based on an Accurate Interpretation of shari'a as opposed to an interpretation based on current debates or civil Law, % <sup>2</sup>	77.7	80.7	75.7	69.6	47.9
Husband Should Always Have the Final Say in Family Matters, % <sup>3</sup>	70.0	67.0	63.7	47.0	54.0
Disagree that Men Make Better Politicians than Women, % <sup>3</sup>	26.4	26.3	28.3	51.1	41.6

Sources: 1: WVS6, 2: ABIII, 3: ABV.

nationwide political change. This apparent stability had been explained by factors such as economic or strategic rents enabling authoritarian regimes to strike an 'authoritarian bargain' with (middle class) citizens (Ross 2011; Schwarz 2008; cf. Oskarsson and Ottosen 2010); authoritarian rulers' skill at diffusing discontent (Brumberg 2002; Heydemann 2007; Hinnebusch 2006); Western powers' support to ensure their own security and supplies of energy; and so-called 'Islamic', 'Arab', or 'traditional' values supposedly antithetical to democracy (Fish 2011; Bishin and Cherif 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2003; Norris and Inglehart 2002).

While to varying extents, these factors contributed to regimes' apparent stability, beneath the surface of an apparent calm rarely disturbed by overt nationwide grievances – much less mass protest – the 'authoritarian bargains' which had contributed to that apparent stability throughout the postcolonial period had been eroding. The promise of a decent standard of living and jobs in return for political acquiescence had been gradually cut back since the 1970s by welfare cuts, privatisations and other 'open door' economic policies, not least in response to demands from Western allies (Hanieh 2013; Achcar 2013). This erosion of rights and living standards required repression to keep increasingly disgruntled populations politically passive. Populist authoritarian regimes had historically used strategies of political 'decompression' (Hinnebusch 1998) – i.e. concessions and openings to absorb protest or co-opt opponents. Such political openings became harder as 'reforms' progressed since they might allow opposition groups to gain traction. This meant post-populist autocracies had to simultaneously impose both economic and political strictures on their populations (Teti, Abbott, and Cavatorta 2018) while slowly morphing political systems' façades to mimic liberal democracy (Collier and Levitsky 1997).

In short, North African regimes feigned the political reform they could no longer afford. Consciously or not, under the banner of 'stability' and a

'pragmatic' gradualist approach to democratisation, the EU supported these strategies. The impasse which North African regimes and their EU counterparts had gotten themselves into effectively 'blinded' them to mass discontent, to its roots and consequences.

Spontaneous demonstrations, which began in Tunisia in December 2010, rapidly spread across North Africa and beyond once the country's autocratic president and his notoriously kleptocratic family clan were removed from office in January 2011. Protests were driven primarily by opposition to corruption, growing social injustice, and political oppression (Teti, Abbott, and Cavatorta 2018). Furthermore, while there was strong support for democracy generally among citizens (Abdelrahman 2015; Tessler, Jamal, and Robbins 2012; Tessler and Robbins 2014; Robbins 2015), protesters' conceptions of democracy reflected this concern with corruption and with socio-economic rights and outcomes – *alongside* civil-political rights including the rights of assembly and protest (Teti, Abbott, and Cavatorta 2019).

### ***Blinded by neoliberalism***

The EU's 'policy blindness' to the roots of these revolts quickly became evident in its strategic reaction to the Uprisings. On the one hand, it responded positively to the 'Arab Spring', acknowledging it had not previously prioritised people's aspirations, admitting that it had supported authoritarian regimes, and committing to 'bringing its interests in line with its values' and to revising policy to reflect protesters' demands (Füle 2011; Teti et al. 2020). On the other hand, it soon became apparent that the EU failed to do so (Teti, Thompson, and Noble 2013).

The reason for this 'blindness' has at least partly to do with the Union's vision of itself and how it translates that vision into policy. The EU's pre-Uprisings policy framework was built on the notion that inclusive democracy and development would be achieved through 'market liberalisation', and in particular through the attraction of regulatory convergence with the EU itself, whereby through a process of supplying 'everything but membership' (Kelley 2006), Neighbourhood states would be re-made (Bicchi 2006) in the EU's particular view of itself (Del Sarto 2016). Since underpinning that regulatory framework were the Union's own 'fundamental values', the EU sees itself as a 'normative power' (Manners 2002), capable of defining a new, progressive 'normal' for third countries. This approach, in turn, is rooted in the EU's reading of its own history and, in particular, of the reasons for its economic and political success. In the process of forging this historical revisionism around political and economic neoliberalism, the Union has elided the role of both Keynesian macroeconomic strategy – including labour protections – and of the state's provision of welfare and essential services, which were crucial both in creating prosperity and in reinforcing social and political



cohesion in post-WWII Europe (Teti et al. 2020). Indeed, the EU only included democracy promotion in its foreign policy agenda after the end of the Cold War when it came to see, along with other Western countries and the IFIs, democracy and capitalism as the only path to development (Abrahamsen 2000; Teti et al. 2020). Subsequent policy agreements reflect this logic, from the first policy agreement with North African countries that included democracy and conditionality clauses – the European Mediterranean Partnership agreed at Barcelona in 1995 (European Commission 1995) – to the current European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), initially introduced in 2004<sup>3</sup> and revised following the Uprisings first in 2011 and then in 2015 (European Commission 2004, 2015, 2011a, 2011b).

However, in exporting its self-image through foreign policy, the EU leaves out an essential element of its success: social democracy, rather than mere market democratisation (Pace and Seeberg 2010; Pace 2009). The Union promotes neo-liberal economic policies without *also* exporting the social policies which enabled Europe to moderate the inequalities of the market and which – at least partly – accounts for its social cohesion (Teti et al. 2020). Indeed, since the establishment of the Union, the essential role of these social policies has been increasingly elided in EU policy documentation.<sup>4</sup>

Detailed analyses of the discursive structure and constructions of democracy in EU policy documentation betrays as much (Teti 2012; Teti et al. 2020). For present purposes, the *Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity* (PDSP) (March 2011) – the first and most progressive of these documents – will serve to illustrate broader trends.

First, the preambles of such post-Arab Spring EU Neighbourhood Policy documents from the PDSP onwards display a holistic view of democracy, remarking on its inseparability from ‘indivisible’ human rights – i.e. implicitly, both civil–political and socio-economic –, social inclusion (welfare) and ‘inclusive development’. However, within the body of PDSP – and of each policy document since the ‘Arab Spring’ began – that holistic vision is slowly but surely eroded, leaving precisely the same vision of ‘market democracy’ which was the hallmark of both the EU’s pre-Uprisings ENP *and* of its historically revisionist narrative about its own, internal development.

Second, civil–political rights are only selectively espoused: while documents frequently mention rights such as voting and freedom of thought and conscience, they generally omit the rights to organise and protest. Moreover, PDSP and all subsequent ENP policy implicitly establish a hierarchy between civil–political and socio-economic rights. This hierarchy is evident, for example, in the fact that whenever these documents mention civil and political rights, they invariably explicitly link them to democracy, whereas social and economic rights are not. In fact, throughout, PDSP refers to issues of social justice and social and economic questions as matters of development, growth and economic policy generally, but never uses the language

of *rights* in connection to these. By contrast, civil and political rights are never similarly 'demoted'.

Finally, this 'relegation' of socio-economic rights – as well as political rights such as the right to protest, which authoritarian regimes consider 'sensitive' – finds a counterpart in the realm of (macro) economic strategy. PDSP states that the Uprisings represented 'the hope of a better life for the people of the region and for greater respect of human rights, pluralism, rule of law and social justice – universal values that we all share' (European Commission 2011a, 2) and that only 'sustainable and *inclusive* growth development of poorer regions and job creation' that meets the population's demands can help deliver these (European Commission 2011a, 7). At first brush, one might think that the EU would then reflect on the evidence that the 'neoliberal' strategies which the likes of Tunisia or Egypt – ironically, lauded by the IMF for their 'reforms' shortly before their respective revolutions – produce socio-economic problems which have only worsened since their introduction in the late 1970s/early 1980s. However, PDSP and successive documents do not say how the Union intends to apply these lessons by changing the logic underpinning its trade, development, or lending strategies. Much less does PDSP recognise even the possibility of a link between its own economic strategies and the causes of the Uprisings insofar as the former contribute to exacerbating problems of inequality, poverty and precarity. The only apparent change – rather than 'tactical' increases in funds available for loans or aid – is in the EU's shift from advocating Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) to 'Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements' (DCFTAs). For the EU, the problem appeared to be not the *nature* of neoliberal economic strategy but the *intensity and breadth* of its application.

What emerges from analysing the conceptual structure of post-Uprisings documents is a strong continuity with the rationales and strategies for democratisation and development found in pre-Uprising ones. Despite talk of 'indivisible' human rights, democracy is understood as achievable merely through the exercise of a narrow subset of civil-political rights, 'demoting' rights such as association and protest, and reducing socio-economic rights to matters of economic strategy. Development policy, for its part, continues to rely on market-driven neoliberal processes, which have notably failed since they began to be applied in former 'revolutionary republics' in North Africa and the Arab world more generally in the 1970s (e.g. Egypt) and 1980s (e.g. Tunisia).

In stark contrast to the central importance of socio-economic rights and social justice to North African respondents, the EU continues to think of democracy as little more than the exercise of a restricted category of civil-political rights – which, ironically, are precisely those rights North African regimes have been eager to dress autocracy with (Collier and Levitsky 1997).

## Conclusion

The analysis of public opinion polling data presented here confirms and expands upon earlier, more limited studies suggesting that North African citizens think of democracy not just in formal, institutional terms but see it as inextricably linked to substantive outcomes such as social justice. In doing so, this study complements qualitative, interview-based research, which has long highlighted the importance of such issues.

A country-level analysis of respondents' conception of religion – to the extent that this is possible, given current survey designs – suggests simplistic arguments concerning the (in)compatibility of religion and democracy or the supposed 'essential' traits of the former are unsustainable. Instead, survey evidence suggests respondents may be articulating a demand for social justice *through* religious symbolic repertoires.

Our analysis of survey data also highlights the importance of both socio-economic rights and religion and the relation of both to democracy – in citizens' minds. Certainly, people value democracy and freedom from oppression, and – like the EU – they understand democracy as requiring civil and political rights. However, citizens *also* believe democracy entails a thicker, more 'social' democracy that guarantees economic and social rights in principle and delivers on them in practice.

The significance of this conception of democracy was not taken into account in either pre-or post-Uprisings EU Neighbourhood Policy. There is a mismatch between the conception of democracy at the heart of the EU's policy 'supply' and the conception held by populations in their 'demand' for democracy. Survey evidence suggests this mismatch contributes to the EU's poor reputation and 'normative powerlessness' in its Southern Neighbourhood. Moreover, by not meeting people's demand for *both* more social justice and political freedom, the EU contributes to those structural economic and political factors which drive discontent, and thus instability and insecurity, including its own.

## Notes

1. Missing values: Algeria 7.5%, Egypt 26.6%, Libya 32%, Morocco 14%, Tunisia 18.3%
2. Missing values: Algeria 3.4%, Egypt 10.5%, Libya 1.7%, Morocco 15.1%, Tunisia 4.4%.
3. The ENP was very strongly influenced by the accession criteria developed in the context of the EU's post-Cold War 'Eastern Expansion'. This was also true of the EU's foreign service (RelEx, then External Action Service) and drafters of the ENP, many of whom previously worked in DG Enlargement. This 'expanded' approach to the Mediterranean took very little account of how regional populations conceived of 'democracy'. For more detailed examinations of these issues, see Teti et al. (2020).

4. The genealogy of the Union's 'neoliberalism' and its – and its Member States' – abandonment of social democracy is complex, its precise origin debatable, but might be traced to the 1993 'Copenhagen Criteria' (which emphasise democratic institutions, market economies, and the legal-institutional *acquis communautaire*), the 1985 Single European Act and the Delors Commissions themselves, or even the 1975 Helsinki Conference principles.

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Arab Barometer survey data and technical details about the surveys can be downloaded at: <https://www.arabbarometer.org/survey-data/data-downloads/>.

Arab Transformations survey data can be downloaded at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316553681\\_Arab\\_Transformations\\_Project\\_Data\\_Set\\_SPSS\\_Version](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316553681_Arab_Transformations_Project_Data_Set_SPSS_Version). Technical details can be downloaded at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316553387\\_Arab\\_Transformations\\_Survey\\_Code\\_Book](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316553387_Arab_Transformations_Survey_Code_Book).

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