A contradictory 2019 in the Arab world: The heralds of a second Arab Spring in times of increased vulnerability and upgraded authoritarianism

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Abstract: *During the year 2019 mass mobilisations broke out throughout the Arab region, with protestors calling for regime change and denouncing mismanagement, corruption and the lack of basic services and human rights in countries as diverse as Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt. In some cases they were violently opposed and quelled; in others they brought about a transitional process. These democratic processes and authoritarian reactions were accompanied by an important case of democratic consolidation in Tunisia and peaceful transfer of power in Mauritania. Some observers saw in these movements the sparks of a second Arab Spring, while others noted an upgrading of authoritarianism, through different repression techniques against protesters, activists and civil society organisations. Security forces and tribunals have been used for repression, but so have new constitutional and legislative texts that have shifted the balance of power in favour of the executive and the military. The repression of cyberspace was extended through new technological tools that allow for the monitoring, tracking and silencing of dissenting voices. Beyond these two opposing dynamics, the socio-economic situation in many countries across the region deteriorated, increasing the vulnerability of groups such as women, children, stateless persons and refugees. The socio-economic situation has also provided several local, national, regional and international actors with a means to exercise economic violence that typically impact on the most vulnerable, depriving them of their most basic human rights or allowing them only conditional access to these rights.*

1   Introduction

Two opposing analytical frameworks – gradual liberalisation and democratisation and resilience of authoritarianism – dominate the literature on the Arab region. In this vast literature Rivetti proposes a combined approach that shows the coexistence and overlap of the two perspectives (Rivetti 2015). Adopting this approach, we look into significant political events that occurred in 2019, namely, the new protest movements across many countries in the region, while identifying responses that comply with previous trends, notably repressive mechanisms and power consolidation in the region, as well as the socio-economic effects of a protracted crisis. Although not exhaustive, the events and dynamics discussed in this article allow us to identify and better understand the nature of the new trend that emerged in 2019, with the multiplication of mass mobilisations that could be regarded as a second wave of democratisation swiping through the Arab world. The article draws on an extensive literature review of local and international media and academic articles, reports of human rights monitoring bodies and intergovernmental organisations. It also includes data from direct participatory observation, that of the protest movement in Lebanon.

2   The sparks of a second Arab Spring

In response to various socio-economic, political and human rights issues, a new cycle of protests shook the Middle East and North Africa throughout 2019, as the map in Figure 1 shows. From Sudan to Algeria, Lebanon to Iraq, Egypt to Iran, massive protest movements showed the signs of an end to the 'Arab Winter' with its resurgence of authoritarianism, absolute monarchies, state collapse and radical Islamic contestation. Although national contexts differ, a sense of frustration and injustice stemming from worsening living conditions, endemic corruption and state violence, leading people from all walks of society to take to the streets eight years after the Arab Spring. Governments rapidly reacted to this situation and opted for different repressive tactics with some commonalities from a rhetoric of division and fear, to direct violence, and other forms of control such as internet shutdowns.

Figure 1: Map of Protest Intensity (light green – low protest intensity
*   to dark green – high protest intensity) (The GDELT project*
*   2019)*
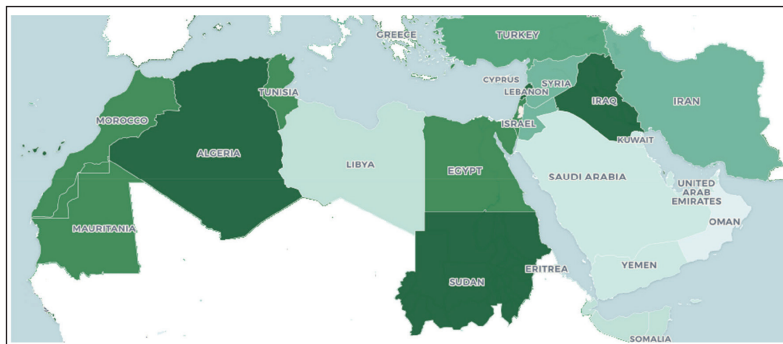
2.1   Contesting military regimes

Sudan and Algeria have two of the oldest surviving military regimes in
the region. Massive protest movements shook these regimes to the core
and brought down the heads of state in both countries while engaging the
military in a transition process.

2.1.1   Sudan: Toppling a 30 year-long authoritarian rule and the
multiple challenges of transition

Protests started in Sudan in December 2019 in a context of dramatically-
rising living costs and austerity measures. The movement was political
from the outset, with people denouncing corruption and calling for an
end to military rule and the resignation of President Omar al-Bashir who
had since 1989 been in power. Offices of the ruling party and national
security were also targeted. This was not the first time the regime had been
challenged. In 2012 and 2013 protests mainly took place in peripheral
regions, and they were violently subdued. This time, the country witnessed
'the wealthy classes of Khartoum finally converging with the peripheries'
(Chevrillon-Guibert et al 2019). Organisations such as the Sudanese
Professional Association were structuring the movement. A sit-in near
the army headquarters in Khartoum became the epicentre of the protest
movement, with demonstrators joining from all over the country in a spirit
of national unity upholding striking slogans such as 'We are all Darfur'.

   The government responded by using tear gas and live ammunition,
detaining activists, censoring media and on 22 February 2019 declaring
a state of national emergency (Human Rights Watch 2019a). The
persistence of the peaceful contestation eventually led to the resignation

of al-Bashir on 11 April, ousted by the Sudanese armed forces. Protesters remained mobilised to put 'pressure on the new military council to hand power to civilian rule and demanded justice for past crimes' (Henry & Wabwire, Human Rights Watch 2019: 3). Sudanese security forces, led by paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), continued violent crackdowns culminating on 3 June in a deadly attack on a protest area, with shootings, beatings and sexual assaults against women (BBC Africa 2019; UN News 2019), while bodies were dumped into the Nile river. Over 120 people were killed, more than 700 were wounded and dozens more disappeared. Security forces also implemented a near-total restriction to internet services (Human Rights Watch 2019a).

Negotiations between the Transitional Military Council and civil opposition groups gathered under the banner of the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), reached a power sharing agreement via the creation of a mixed Sovereign Council. The Constitutional Declaration regarding the Transitional Authority was signed on 17 August and Abdalla Hamdok became the first civilian Prime Minister of Sudan since 1989. On 29 November two major laws dismantled the military-Islamist al-Ingaz ('Salvation') regime set up by al-Bashir, and dissolved the National Congress Party to 'preserve the dignity of Sudanese people after years of tyranny' (France 24 2019). These measures met the demands of the FFC and civil protests calling for justice for victims of the former regime (RFI 2019a), although a number of issues remained at stake within the transitional process. Indeed, the country's resources (oil, gold, agro-pastoral resources) remain in the hands of the military and the security apparatus (Lavergne 2019). Moreover, foreign economic support from non-democratic states could undermine the democratic process. Justice, and the fate of marginalised regions of the country, certainly remain a major issue of concern. Transitional justice and the recognition of 'grave human rights violations committed against the Sudanese' are elements that support negotiations and the democratic transitional process (Dabanga News 2019). Yet, while the Declaration mentioned a Transitional Justice Commission, it did not detail its composition and mandate. The fact that the armed forces remain in power, including the RSF responsible for crimes committed in Darfur as well as the 3 June massacre, may cast doubt on the achievement of justice, in addition to the fact that the Declaration did not address the issue of peace in Darfur, the Nuba Mountains and Blue South Nile. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister took an important symbolic step, visiting camps in el-Fasher, North Darfur (RFI 2019a). It is also to be noted that women's groups, who played a leading role in the movement, called for more equal representation in the transitional government (Sudan Tribune 2019).

2.1.2   *Algeria: The call for a 'complete change of the political system'*

In February 2019 the Algerian *hirak* (also called the 'Revolution of smiles') was triggered by the bid of 81 year-old President Abdelaziz Bouteflika for a fifth term as President. First heard in stadiums, slogans were later taken up by hundreds of thousands of Algerians. In response to messages posted on social networks (Sereni 2019) demonstrations took place in more than 40 cities, 'rooted in popular neighbourhoods and dominated by a young generation of activists' rejecting any representation (Bella 2019: 1). Protesters peacefully demanded the departure of the regime each Friday despite the President's attempt to appease the movement by promising a new Constitution once re-elected. On 2 April 2019 Bouteflika resigned under the pressure of the street and the army chief of staff and Deputy Defence Minister General Ahmed Gaid Salah. While Senate President Abdelkader Bensalah became President, General Gaid Salah wielded effective power (Human Rights Watch 2019b). As in Sudan, the fall of the main figure did not weaken the mobilisation or the growing repression of protesters. The protestors continued to demand genuine democracy as well as 'a fairer management of resources, an end to corruption and the effective application of the principle of sovereignty' (Benderra et al 2020: 3). Authorities had to concede and proceed to the reshuffling government, arresting ministers and businessmen close to the deposed administration as well as officials of the political police. The protesters continued to oppose the newly-set elections and demand the resignation of the interim President and Prime Minister.

From the beginning of June the authorities used repressive tools 'from the logic of intimidation to the logic of prison', relying on the 'vague and elastic provisions of the Criminal Code' such as the notion of 'undermining national unity' (France24 2020: 1). Arrests often reflected procedural violations and the invasion of privacy (houses, mailboxes, social media) as well as the physical abuse of women (Human Rights Watch 2019c). Between June and October authorities arrested and charged 86 persons, accusing them of 'harming the integrity of the national territory' (Human Rights Watch 2019c), on the ground that the 41 arrested people were holding or possessing the Amazigh flag (Human Rights Watch 2019c). The government's rhetoric to justify the repression raises the spectre of infiltration, division and destabilisation to discredit protest movements. The crackdown further escalated on students as well as on the *hirak* leaders with several arrests in September (Meriem-Benziane 2019). Journalists also came under increased pressure, through suspensions, blocked websites, arrests and judiciary harassment. Overall, at least 300 people were arbitrarily arrested during the *hirak* (Amnesty International 2019a). These arrests only amplified the mobilisations, which also questioned the legitimacy of Parliament (Guemar et al 2019).

2.2 Mass demonstrations denouncing power-sharing formulas

Lebanon and Iraq witnessed massive movements of protests in the autumn of 2019 contesting the *mouhasasa* system that governs the two multi-confessional Middle Eastern states in which different political groups share power and state resources while claiming to represent one of the nation's constitutive groups.

2.2.1 *Lebanon*

On 17 October 2019 the longest and most widespread protest movement in the history of Lebanon erupted, following the publication of the government's proposed regressive tax reforms that included a tax on voice over internet protocol (IP) services. Considering that Lebanon has one of the highest prices for phone services worldwide (Byblos Bank 2015: 2), in combination with a looming economic crisis and high corruption rates, this sparked anger across the country. Even though the tax reforms were soon withdrawn, civil disobedience campaigns continued to grow and spread throughout the country, ranging from road blockages across to sit-ins at political, judicial and economic institutions and politicians' homes. Many areas around Lebanon were reclaimed as public spaces in which multiple civic activities were initiated, such as public discussion, debate fora, and even guerrilla environmentalisms introducing urban gardening and coordinated recycling activities (Anderson 2019).

In contrast to Lebanon's earlier protest movements, as in 2005 against the Syrian occupation or against the garbage crisis in 2015, the October uprising is characterised by its grassroots and leaderless character, its multiple hotspots spread throughout the country, including peripheral areas. The diversity of the protesters is evident from their diverse political and sectarian identities, but also through the inclusion of 'unemployed youth, frustrated civil servants, university and school students and middle-class business people' (Karam 2019). A striking example of this was the symbolic human chain formed on 27 October that stretched from North to South Lebanon, exemplifying how all communities were united in their demands against the sectarian political establishment.

The October uprising revealed the political system as a flawed consociational system due to clientelism and its failure in providing basic government services (Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs 2019). Accordingly, the protests demanded the resignation of the government, which occurred on 29 October. They also called for the formation of a technocratic independent cabinet, the drafting of a new electoral law and early parliamentary elections. Many groups in the protests emphasised that a new electoral law ought to be non-sectarian in nature and based on equal representation. Furthermore, a 'transparent

and productive public sector' is a widely agreed upon demand (Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs 2019). The protestors also demanded an independent judiciary and accountability of corrupt politicians, and an economic rescue plan with the goal of restructuring national debt, reforming the banking sector and recovering stolen funds. Finally, there were calls for new socio-economic policies, the consolidation of public services, gender equality and environmental regulations and planning.

2.2.2   *Iraq*

Similarly to Lebanon, the protests in Iraq erupted in October, ushering one of many similarities between the two protest movements. Indeed, the non-sectarian nature of the protesters took centre stage, as well as their rejection of the political elite and their power-sharing agreement called *Muhasasa* (Halawa 2020). Mass demonstrations against political corruption and the government's failure to provide basic services has for many years been recurring, yet it reached a peak 'in terms of size and ideational coherence' in 2019 (Dodge & Mansour 2020: 58). Besides local syndicates, including lawyers and engineers, many students and even school children took to the streets (Al-Nashmi 2019). It comes as no surprise in a country where 60 per cent of the population is under the age of 25 and youth unemployment at 36 per cent (Jiyad 2020).

Iraqi protesters used roadblocks to prevent government employees from getting to their work and blocking roads to the sites of major importance to the economy, such as oil fields or ports (Aboulenein & Jalabi 2019). The decision to focus on oil fields was meant to underline the stark contrast in between its oil wealth and the government's failure in providing basic services from clean water to electricity. As the protests were countered with increasing violence, 'their demands radicalised and expanded to encompass a program for the transformation of the whole system', asking for the 'resignation of the current government and replacement by an independent non-party caretaker administration', a new electoral law, new laws concerning sources of funding for political parties and UN supervision in new national elections (Dodge & Mansour 2020: 65).

The protesters succeeded in getting former Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi to resign in October. In order to end the monopoly of power of the current political establishment, protestors are calling for an electoral law with a 'full individual candidacy system' (Halawa 2020) to replace the current broad proportional presentation system. Another demand has been to end foreign meddling in Iraqi affairs by the United States of America and Iran (Loveluck 2020). Ironically, the government accused protesters of foreign influence in an attempt to challenge their legitimacy (Dodge & Mansour 2020: 66). Another counter-tactic of the authorities

was a two-week internet black-out followed by a ban on social media websites (Al Jazeera 2019a). One can note that the government identity tactics and mobilisation of symbolic capital failed.

A major contrast between Lebanon and Iraq is the degree of violence facing protesters. While protests in Lebanon have generally been peaceful, repression has led in Iraq to about 600 casualties in 2019 (Halawa 2020). Both the state's security forces and militia groups escape with impunity for their violent crackdown on protesters (Alaaldin 2020), and their violation of their right to freedom (Human Rights Watch 2020a). Moreover, journalists were prevented from documenting protests or corruption cases, sometimes through detention or incarceration (ANHRI 2020).

2.3 Quelled protest movements

In both Iran and Egypt, new contestation movements appeared in 2019 after years of relative silence. They were met with fierce clampdowns, showing the extent of resilience of the current regimes and what the tactics they resort to in order to remain in power.

2.3.1 *Iran*

In the Islamic Republic of Iran protests flared up in 2019 when the fuel price suddenly increased by 50 per cent (UN 2019a), adding to the long-term frustrations regarding the structural economic crisis, low public trust towards Hassan Rouhani's government and violent political repressions. On 15 November between 120 000 and 200 000 demonstrators took the streets in over 40 cities; a higher number than in the December 2017 and January 2018 protests, but lower than in the 2008 'Green movement'. According to official data, protesters mostly belonged to the weaker socio-economic layer of society (Zimmt & Raz 2020), mostly comprised of jobless citizens and unpaid workers. Verified video footage shows evidence of 'severe use of violence' by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Basij militia, carrying field executions (Ahwaz Human Rights 2019a), endorsed by Ayatollah Khamenei in an address aired on television urging them to 'implement their tasks' against 'thugs' (NCR Iran 2019). The systematic use of lethal forces on unarmed protesters in protests in Iran has become 'a matter of state policy', violating the Iranian Constitution regarding public gatherings and marches (article 27). When the protest erupted, the Iranian government immediately shut down internet and telephone services in Tehran, Mashhad and Shiraz to prevent the sharing of information and evidence of state violence for one week (Netblock 2019a). Such a shutdown is the most severe recorded in the country since the election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013 (Netblock 2019a). According to UN estimates, at least 7 000 people were arrested while casualties amounted to 208 citizens in five days, including women and children (Office of the

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2019), with high casualties in Khuzestan province (Ahwaz Human Rights 2019b).

Experts shared concerns regarding arbitrary arrests, unfair trials, lack of access to lawyers, poor conditions of detention, intimidation, and confessions under duress, as well as death penalty sentences, when senior officials predicted 'severe punishment' of protestors. On 26 November Minister of the Interior Abdolreza Rahmani-Fazl strongly denounced important material damages targeting institutions and public structures including banks and religious sites, while General Hossein Salami, head of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, accused the US and its allies of pouring oil onto the fire.

The frustration of the Iranian people might impact voter turnout in the 2020 parliamentary elections, affecting Rouhani's coalition of moderate reformists and the legitimacy of the regime. However, the strengthening of conservative forces in Parliament could lead to further radicalisation and polarisation, increasing internal pressure and complicating Rouhani's foreign and domestic agenda, without offering a satisfactory solution to the increasing economic crisis and popular discontent (Zimmt & Raz 2020). As shown by the slogans chanted by the crowds such as 'Reformist or conservative, the game is over', 'Death to the dictator', new uprisings could appear, denouncing the system as a whole rather than referring to a specific political camp. Moreover, systematic repressions over the last years did not stifle protests and therefore might increase the unity of different social categories against the Islamic Republic itself (Jiyad 2020: 2).

2.3.2 *Egypt*

On 20, 21 and 27 September 2019 protests took place across Egypt denouncing corruption, basic rights violations and austerity measures including subsidy cuts and price increases for basic goods in a context of constant poverty increase (*The New York Times* 2019). A YouTube call by businessman in exile, Mohammad Ali, followed by other activists sparked the first protests that gathered 2 000 people in eight cities including Cairo and Alexandria (Al Jazeera 2019b). The protesters called for the ousting of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (Al Jazeera 2019c), allegedly shaking the government 'to its core' and setting of a 'full-throttle clampdown' launched by the authorities 'to crush demonstrations and intimidate activists, journalists and others into silence' (Amnesty International 2019b). Egyptian security forces used lethal force and live ammunition against those who dared to take to the streets (Michaelson 2019). By 26 September the protests were met with the largest mass arrests conducted under el-Sisi's regime, with over 2 000 protestors and 111 minors apprehended (Mada Masr 2019). Arrests became systematic and generalised, targeting activists, professional lawyers or journalists, or any individuals alleged to

have taken part in protests. Prominent opposition figures were detained, 'despite no indication that any were involved with the new wave of dissent' (Michaelson 2019: 2). Cyber-control was one of the tools used to asphyxiate the movement, in line with expanding repressive methods facilitated by the law passed in 2013 aimed at increasing restrictions on Egypt's internet (Netblocks 2019b), combined with local mainstream media denying protests, sharing fake news and discrediting foreign media (Magdi 2019). While not addressing the protests directly, President al-Sisi during his speech at the UN General Assembly on 25 September (State Information System 2019: 5) promoted a global framework to counter terrorism, justifying the intensified control over public institutions through his reshuffling of the army, bureaucracy and intelligence services.

Socio-economic despair and frustration led Egyptians to question the political system and could lead to larger protests coming from the disadvantaged social groups as 32,5 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line (CAPMAS 2019). Even if the protests movements in both Iran and Egypt seem to have been quelled in 2019, one can expect them to reappear if the economic situation continues to worsen.

2.4 Democratic hopes through elections

In North Africa hopes are rising with signs of democratic consolidation in Tunisia and an unexpected presidential election in Mauritania. Nonetheless, both countries still face important challenges on their path to democratic consolidation.

2.4.1 *Tunisia*

Since ousting former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali during 2011, Tunisia has become somewhat of an outlier in the region in terms of democratic transition. The planned parliamentary elections of October 2019 and the early presidential elections of September and October 2019, following the passing of President Beji Caid Essebsi in July, constituted a test to Tunisia's democracy (Democracy Reporting International (DRI) 2019).

An interesting trend in these elections was the use of social networks in political campaigning. Even though Tunisia ranks best in the region as far as press freedom is concerned (Repucci et al 2019), the political effects of social networks should not be overlooked. Facebook was the main source of information on electoral matters during these elections (Democracy Reporting International (DRI) 2019b: 3). It is to be noted that electoral campaigning on social media generally ignored electoral regulations by continuing political, sometimes covert, communication during the electoral silence period, yet none actively supporting the eventual winner of the presidential elections, Kais Saied.

Following the October parliamentary elections, Ennahda, a moderate Islamic party, became the largest party in Parliament, despite losing seats, because of political fragmentation. As for the presidential elections, its candidate lost during the first round to two new figures: Nabil Karoui, who spent most of the campaign period in prison for money laundering, and Kais Saied, a constitutional law specialist and 'a political outsider' (Freedom House 2020a). The latter emerged victorious with 72 per cent of votes and with a remarkable support base among young voters (Allahoum 2019). His inaugural speech included a pledge to 'honor Tunisia's obligations under international law' whereas as a candidate he had made statements opposing gender equality in inheritance law, favoured the criminalisation of homosexuality and defended the death penalty (Guellali 2019).

Interestingly, the population's optimism in the democratic process increased this year, as a nationwide poll concluded that 70 per cent of Tunisians 'think ordinary people can influence decisions in their country' (International Republican Institute 2020). On the other hand, faith in the government's will to address the needs of the population remained low, with corruption being perceived as a significant cause (International Republican Institute 2019).

2.4.2   *Mauritania: First democratic steps towards human rights protection?*

On 22 June 2019 the Islamic Republic of Mauritania for the first time since the declaration of independence on 28 November 1960 held free elections, raising hope that the new head of state would ensure human rights protection for all citizens (Human Rights Watch 2020d). President Ould Abdel Aziz stepped aside after two mandates of five years. His decision ensured the respect of the constitutional two-term political limit, and paved the way for a peaceful transition towards a democratically-elected government (Mauritania Constitution art 26/28). Mohamad Ould Ghazouani won the presidential elections with a first-round victory by universal direct suffrage with 52 per cent of the votes. The new President is a member of the Union for the Republic, the strongest political party in Mauritania (Melcangi 2019) which positions itself as an ally of the West against Islamist militants. If elections were held in the presence of an electoral observation mission from the African Union (AU) (AU 2019), the opposition still denounced fraud (RFI 2019b) and appealed for their annulment. Moreover, the authorities' decision not to welcome foreign observers was strongly criticised. Concerns were also raised about the military background of the new President, former ministry of defence and chief of staff under Abdel Aziz's presidency. His links could undermine the separation of powers. On 23 June protests broke out and led to the arrest and detention of at least two journalists and one local activist, as well as the sentencing of six activists to six months' imprisonment and

fines for taking part in the protests, vandalism, and peace disturbance. The government also took restrictive measures by cutting off internet services, which were only restored on 3 July (Human Rights Watch 2019d).

While entering a transitional period, Mauritania has to tackle long-standing difficulties and challenges fragmenting and fragilising its society, such as slavery practices, gender-based violence, the persistence of marginalised social groups (CERD/C/MRT/CO/8-14), and ethno-racial divisions (Human Rights Watch 2019d).

3   Authoritarianism upgraded

The consolidation of authoritarian regimes affected many countries in the region and assumed different forms: from repressive measures involving security forces and the courts to more sophisticated legal instruments such as constitutional amendments, anti-cybercrime legislation and state of emergency laws.

3.1   Repressive actions against opposition

In Egypt and Syria political opposition and civil activism have been countered through different repressive means, such as enforced disappearances, detention and even executions. Courts and security forces have played an important role in this process.

3.1.1   *Egypt*

Human Right Watch summarised the situation of Egypt in 2019 as being the 'worst human rights crisis in decades', as the country continues to experience the suppression of rights and civil liberties, widespread arrests of political opponents, particularly against the Muslim brotherhood, but even of seculars and liberals. The Egyptian Commission of Rights and Freedoms documented over 2 200 arrests of critics, satirists and political opponents by the Egyptian Security Forces (ESF). At the beginning of November 2019 the number increased to 3 800, with a total of 60 000 political prisoners. These activists have reportedly been subjected to torture, forced disappearances, extra-judicial killings, arbitrary arrests and illegal detention (Mandour 2019), followed by prolonged pre-trial detentions (Al-Monitor 2020). On 17 June 2019 the overthrown President Mohamed Morsi died in detention, with critics blaming the poor detention conditions for his death.

As stated earlier, the September demonstrations were met by a wave of arrests. Under the guise of counter-terrorism, activists and journalists have been prosecuted for participating in unauthorised protests, membership of

a terrorist or banned group, and harming national security and public peace. The Director of the Adalah Centre for Rights and Freedoms, Mohamed el-Baqer, was even arrested for providing legal aid to political detainees that participated in the demonstrations demanding the resignation of the Egyptian President. After being put in preventive detention, he was eventually transferred to Tora prison, a maximum security prison notorious for its inhumane conditions, where he is facing charges similar to those of fellow lawyer and prominent women rights activist Mahienour el-Masry (Front Line Defenders 2020). Some other prominent cases include Asmaa Dabees, a leading feminist (FIDH 2019) and human rights lawyer Ibrahim Metwally, who remains in police custody even after the Cairo Criminal Court had found him not guilty on 14 October 2019 (OHCHR 2019).

Recommendations submitted during the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Egypt in November 2019 requested the opening of investigation on the use of torture and other ill-treatment by security forces, as well as on detention conditions, arbitrary travel bans and the judicial harassment of human rights activists (Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review 2020:10).

3.1.2 Syria

Although the Syrian Constitution of 2012 in article 42 enshrined freedom of speech and in article 43 that of the press, in practice these freedoms were greatly restricted in government-held areas in 2019. Syrian security forces have arrested hundreds of activists, former opposition leaders and their family members in areas retaken from anti-government groups around Damascus and Daraa, even after they had signed reconciliation agreements with authorities protecting them arrest (Human Rights Watch 2019e). Local organisations, including Syrians for Truth and Justice and the Office of Daraa Martyrs, have documented at least 500 arrests in these areas since August (Human Rights Watch 2019e). Courts also participate in these dynamics, using the notions of 'weakening national sentiment', and 'undermining state prestige' as tools to criminalise anti-government expression (Fares 2019). Journalists are targeted by both regime forces and extremist groups. In 2019 at least seven journalists were killed in Syria (Committee to Protect Journalists 2019b).

Non-state actors and Jihadi groups also use repressive means. Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham, an al-Qaeda affiliate predominantly active in Idlib, arbitrarily arrested numerous residents in areas under its control (Human Rights Watch 2020e). On 11 November 2019 its officers threatened to kill journalists as part of their response to protestors in Idlib province (Orient Net 2019). Two photo journalists, Omar Haj Kadour, who works for *AFP*, and Ibrahim Khatib, who works for the *BBC* and the Turkish news agency *Anadolu*, have been beaten (Reporters Without Borders 2019a). On 22

August 2019 this Jihadi group arrested two citizen journalists: Mohammad Daboul, who worked for the Idlib Media Centre, a local news agency, and Fateh Raslan, a reporter for the Step Feed News website, who was released after having pledged never to work for a media outlet 'opposed to the revolution' (Reporters Without Borders 2019a).

3.2   Constitutional and legal tactics to consolidated authoritarianism

Notwithstanding the fact that human rights principles are enshrined in their constitutions, governments have used constitutional amendments in 2019 to shift the balance of power, reinforcing the executive and sometimes the military. This trend was also supported in the case of Egypt by the renewal of the state of emergency law that seems to usher a return to a permanent state of emergency. Syria, on the other hand, seems to have opted this year for a constitutionally-based peace process in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 of 2015, formally working towards a new constitution and internationally-supervised elections.

Egypt oversaw an important constitutional amendment in 2019, allowing the President to stay in power until 2030 without having to step down at the end of his second term in office in 2022. This constitutional reform benefited from substantial support by the pro-government bloc in Parliament and a public referendum closely monitored by authorities, accompanied by a strong media campaign 'Do the Right Thing', threats, bribes and a general crackdown on political dissent (The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy 2019). Critics believe that this measure will undermine the separation of powers, while expanding President el-Sisi's power, and also that of the military (ISS PSC Report 2019). Indeed, under his rule the independence of the judiciary has been further curtailed through its subordination to the executive while its jurisdiction has been eroded by military courts, imposing a new type of tougher delegative authoritarian rule (Springborg 2015).

Another threat to the separation of powers and civil liberties came from the State of Emergency Law. It remained in effect in Egypt in 2019. Lifted in 2012, following the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, it was reintroduced in 2017 for a three-month period following a terrorist attack, and has ever since regularly been renewed. State of emergency laws are regarded as a serious threat to freedoms and human rights as they authorise the censorship of newspapers, arbitrary arrests and torture, search without warrants, the detention of suspects without charges, and trials of civilians in military courts (Human Rights Watch 2019).

The Union of the Comoros is a multi-party constitutional republic estimated to be 'partly free' with a score of 50/100 in the Freedom

in the World index. Its President, Azali Assoumani, was re-elected for a fourth term as head of the Union in 2019 following a highly-contested presidential election. Protests against these elections and their results were banned and were met with violence by security forces. Opposition leaders have been detained for claiming voting irregularities (MENA Rights Group 2019a), while journalists and media outlets have been targeted (Committee to Protect Journalists 2019a). Charges against them included defamation, disturbing public order, incitement to violence, offence against the head of state, insulting the magistrate, forgery, and use of false materials.

The country also suffers harsh and life-threatening conditions in its prisons and detention centres, with numerous allegations of torture. Although prohibited by law and the Constitution, cases of arbitrary detention and killings are still regularly reported in the Indian Ocean nation, where court orders are unpredictable and inconsistently enforced; corruption by the judiciary and government officials remains a widespread phenomenon (Melzer OHCHR Special Rapporteur 2019) as courts rarely sentence or fine convicted perpetrators. Hence, the non-enforcement of existing laws and a lack of transparency has a negative impact on civil and political rights.

The formation of a Constitutional Committee on 23 September 2019 was hailed as the first real breakthrough in the Syrian peace process and a turning point for this war-torn country (Mehchy 2019a). It was the result of almost two years of consultations and long debates over the names of the representatives of civil society and the UN's role in their selection (Seibert 2019). The Committee's structure consists of 'equal co-chairs', one from the government, the other from the opposition (UN 2019b). The Committee has two bodies, one smaller and one expanded. The smaller body has 45 members, 15 members nominated by each of the government, the High Negotiations Committee that represents the Syrian opposition, and civil society (Mehchy 2019a). The expanded body has 150 members, 50 members representing each of the government, the opposition and civil society. The smaller body's role is to prepare, draft, and present proposals to the expanded body for discussion and adoption with a 75 per cent decision-making threshold. The Constitutional Committee is authorised either to revise the 2012 Constitution or to draft a new Constitution, according to its terms of reference, agreed upon by the government and the opposition (UN 2019b). During its first meeting on 30 October 2019 the constitutional committee allowed the rival sides in the long-running war to sit face-to-face for the first time in almost nine years (Bibbo 2019). The Kurdish administration was excluded from the Committee, which it considers 'unfair', expressing doubts on the success of the constitutional process (Mehchy 2019a) and the willingness of the regime to reform.

3.3   Digital authoritarianism

Some governments have resorted to another degree refinement in a bid to consolidate their power. Indeed, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Jordan and Egypt recently adopted Cyber Criminal legislation and have applied this in 2019 to identify, monitor, and silence opposition.

When the September 2019 protest broke out, the Egyptian government targeted lawyers, human rights activists, journalists and many other figures with direct cyberattacks (Hoffman 2020). Radwa Mohamed, a young activist, was detained by the security forces following the publication of a video against the President and his wife (MEMO Middle East Monitor 2019). According to Amnesty International, police examined protesters' social accounts which in some cases led to their arrest. Reportedly, many minors were also arrested for 'the inappropriate use of social media', even though many of them did not own a smartphone (Amnesty International 2019c). Egypt's Cyber Crime Law of 2018 allows authorities to censor websites when their content is perceived to threaten national security or the economy. This law grants the government broad powers to restrict freedom of expression, infringe on citizens' privacy, and jail online activists (Human Rights Watch 2019f).

According to Human Rights Watch, Jordanian authorities have detained 'over a dozen people' since mid-March. Most of those arrested were part of the *Hirak* political opposition movement, but among them were also journalists and activists. They were all charged under the Cyber Crime Law for insulting the King, undermining the political regime or for online slander (Human Rights Watch 2019g). Human rights activist Ahmed Tabanja was first detained on 17 March for broadcasting on social media the protest of unemployed Jordanians in front of the royal court complex (Human Rights Watch 2020d). He was arrested a second time on 29 March, due to other Facebook posts. He was charged with 'insulting an official agency' and then released on 21 May (Human Rights Watch 2019g).

In 2019 Amnesty International reported the arbitrary detention in Saudi Arabia of 14 people accused of supporting the women's rights movement, such as Samar Badawi, Loujain al-Hathloul, Iman al-Nafjan, Aziza al-Yousef, and Nassima al-Sada. In November 10 other individuals, including writers and intellectuals, were arrested, but most of them were released after a week (Amnesty International 2020). These arrests were based on the Royal Decree of March 2007 approving the Anti-Cyber Crime Law and its vague clause regarding the 'protection of public interest, morals, and common values'. Indeed, bloggers, activists and normal citizens have been persecuted and detained 'for voicing different opinions, insulting public officials, or supporting forces other than the government in power' (Rossini & Green 2015). Saudi Anti-Cyber Crime Law not only targets individuals but also television programmes. In January 2019 the streaming

service Netflix had to withdraw from its streaming service an episode of a comedy show because it focused on the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the war in Yemen (Rutemberg 2019).

The Iranian government shut down internet services during the November 2019 protest, in order to block people from sharing information about what was going on in the country (Freedom House 2020b), on the basis of the Computer Crimes Law of 2009. This shutdown lasted for almost a week, and was followed by the arbitrary detention of at least 11 journalists and photo reporters, one of whom for tweeting about the shutdown (Reporters Without Borders 2019b). Moreover, in January 2019 the government attempted to ban the use of Instagram, as it did previously with other social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Telegram and Twitter (Titcomb 2019).

4   A year of increased vulnerability

2019 witnessed the worsening of certain ongoing crises which further deteriorated the living conditions for the most vulnerable. After examining two categories of vulnerable groups, namely, Women and children and stateless, refugees and displaced, we will look into how economic violence affects the rights of the most vulnerable.

4.1   Women and children

The armed conflict in Yemen has compounded the vulnerability of women and girls and increased gender inequalities. Women suffer gender-based discrimination in the name of cultural and traditional beliefs (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2019a). Forced marriages, including child marriage, are constantly on the increase and the lack of legal protection for women leaves them exposed to domestic and sexual violence (UN Women 2020). The war added new challenges for women: As men more often are victims of detention or forcible disappearances, many women have become heads of households. This has brought about a shift in the gender roles of Yemeni society that has triggered a patriarchal backlash, as some men feel threatened by the lack of recognition of their primary role within the family, and sometimes use violence as a means of reaffirming their power within their family unit (Amnesty International 2019d). Women activists who have played an important role advocating better rights 'have been threatened, subjected to smear campaigns, beaten and detained' (Human Rights Watch 2019h).

As for children, they have been recruited as soldiers by Houthis, paramilitary forces in Southern Yemen, the Yemeni armed forces, and even foreign powers that have been accused of bringing child mercenaries from Sudan (Varfolomeeva 2019). Children continue to be victims of the conflict

as schools are targeted by air strikes (Human Rights Watch 2019h); 1 800 schools have been declared unfit for use, leaving two million children currently deprived of primary education.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) children with family links to the Islamic State (IS) fighters are among the world's most vulnerable children, as they suffer multiple forms of discrimination and stigmatisation (UNICEF 2019). The Islamic State lost its final territory in 2019 and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, its leader, died during an American air raid in North West Syria. This resulted in the roundup of its combatants and their families in camps. In al-Hol, the largest camp, the population reached approximately 70 000 persons in 2019, 94 per cent of which are women and children, half of the latter being under the age of 12 years (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2019b). This camp is divided into two parts: The largest part hosts Syrians and Iraqis and the other section is for the families of foreign fighters, from more than 60 different countries.

The issue of IS-linked children made headlines in 2019 when some states, such as Kosovo, Australia, and France, repatriated a few hundred of these children, mainly the sick and orphans. It also drew international attention following the Turkish army's offensive in the north-east of Syria in October 2019, when Kurdish forces lost control over these camps (Save the Children 2019). These children are exposed to serious violations and live in precarious conditions, without access to clean water and healthcare assistance, overcrowding, and unsafe latrine and sewage systems. Both Save the Children and Human Rights Watch reported hundreds of deaths for malnutrition and basic illnesses (diarrhea, infections, pneumonia), in addition to serious mental and psychological diseases. These children have witnessed extreme violence and brutality, and in many cases were victims of recruitment in armed groups and indoctrination. Due to their family ties, they are subjected to stigmatisation, rejection and have difficulties in accessing services or basic needs from aid providers.

On the one hand, these children generally are seen as victims instead of perpetrators, but on the other they are perceived as a 'ticking time bomb' (Capone 2019). This is why few states have actively engaged in the repatriation of their minor nationals, and some have looked into the possibility of revoking their nationality as a measure to ban their return. Few have explored 'the only viable option to ensure their well-being and at the same time neutralise further security threats' (Ní Aoláin 2019: 3).

4.2   Stateless, refugees and internally displaced persons

This part focuses on the issues of the stateless, refugee and displaced communities in specific contexts of the Arab world, namely, the countries

of Kuwait, Syria and Lebanon. The conditions of these particular groups are common to many other countries in the MENA region. However, during the year 2019 the target areas were particularly placed under pressure due to internal imbalances or action policies adopted by neighbouring countries which directly affected the evolution of the phenomenon within domestic borders.

In 2019 outstanding cases of stateless people's protests took place in Kuwait. Between 11 and 14 July 2019 12 protesters calling for Bidoon rights in Tayma and Kuwait City were arrested (Amnesty International 2019d). Two of the detained protesters, Nawaf al-Badr and Mohamad al-Anzi, were referred to the prosecutors on 14 July and were charged with 'national security offences'. Their detention was extended for a further 21 days. The prominent human rights defender, Abdulhakim al-Fadhli, and nine others were referred to the prosecutors on 15 July and faced a range of charges including participation in unlicensed protests, the misuse of communication equipment, the spreading of false news, and other national security offences (Amnesty International 2019e). Others were interrogated but not arrested. The protests broke out after the suicide of a 20 year-old, Ayed Hamad Moudath, who endured severe hardships because of a lack of access to official documents (International Observatory of Human Rights 2019).

The Bidoon (which means 'without' in Arabic) are tribes that were not granted citizenship after Kuwait had gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1961. Their statelessness excludes them from the same social and economic rights enjoyed by Kuwaiti citizens. The situation of the Bidoon in Kuwait is only one manifestation of a regional problem, with around 500 000 people believed to be Bidoon across the whole Gulf region (Geneva Council for Rights and Liberties 2019).

In 2019 the Syrian crisis entered its eighth year, with over 6 million Syrian refugees around the world and around 6,5 million internally-displaced persons (IDMC, as of 31 December 2019).

In Lebanon, Syrian refugees witnessed a progressive degradation of their living conditions, protection guarantees and assistance standards. They faced an increasingly aggressive nationalist and discriminatory political discourse which, especially in 2019, promoted a new narrative in favour of the return of refugees to Syria. Two deportation orders were given concerning Syrians that had entered Lebanon illegally: one by the Supreme Defence Council on 15 April 2019, and one by the General Security on 13 May 2019, putting thousands of refugees at risk of persecution, arrest and deportation to Syria (The Legal Agenda 2019). Human Rights Watch reported that, according to the General Security, 2 731 Syrians were deported between May and August 2019 (Human Rights Watch 2019i). In June 2019 an ultimatum was given to Syrian refugees in North-Eastern

Lebanon to demolish hard shelters, which the authorities consider illegal constructions. Some families began to destroy their own homes and the Lebanese army intervened with massive demolitions, starting from Arsal and extending across the Bekaa Valley (Human Rights Watch 2019i). This order represented an important push factor, strongly affecting refugees and their decision to return to Syria, a tendency that increased in 2019. These decisions are 'a flagrant violation of the Constitution, Lebanese laws and international conventions: allowing deportations to be executed by incompetent authorities, without verification of the risks upon return to Syria and without granting Syrians the right of defence and to resort to the judiciary' (The Legal Agenda 2019). They represent a fundamental turning point in the Lebanese policy towards refugees.

The financial crisis in Lebanon also had a strong impact on refugees. Several programmes of aid provision and cash assistance to refugees have been terminated, leading to major difficulties in coping with the situation for people who rely solely on this support (Asharq al-Awsat 2019; Tuzi 2020).

In Syria massive displacements involved 1,8 million people in 2019, mostly due to the new offensives in the north-east and north-west regions. Most of these new evacuations are secondary or third movements for people who had already during previous years fled from their homes. In Idlib, one of the most disturbing situations reported, new attacks and destruction, including on civilian infrastructures, schools and hospitals, forced people into already-overcrowded camps and some humanitarian actors had to suspend their work. Dire conditions led to several deaths and exposed people to the need for water, food, shelter provision and healthcare assistance (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2019b). The Idlib case demonstrates how events have evolved in Syria, highlighting that actual peace or the end of the conflict is far from a reality, and that Syrian people, displaced in the country or having sought refuge in neighbouring countries, remain in need of aid and protection.

4.3   Instrumentalised economic violence

Economic violence represents a form of indirect, structural and collective violence used as an instrument by a larger group against another group or set of individuals, in order to achieve political, economic or social objectives (Violence Prevention Alliance 2020). Economic violence could be exerted by the state on the people living within its borders (Kesztyus 2018), any other non-state groups, or even those from a foreign state. Conflict, corruption, misguided socio-economic policies, sanctions and embargoes all are major problems that have a very deep impact on the socio-economic situation of citizens, leading to widening the social and economic inequalities. Syria, Yemen and Iran have witnessed in 2019 a

series of economic challenges and crises that left their citizens struggling to survive. We will look into three types of economic violence: governmental, international and collateral.

4.3.1   *Governmental economic violence*

In times of war, economic policies may be used as weapons by governments through the re-allocation of expenditure across regions and across sectors of society. The rise in defence expenditure during conflict typically occurs at the expense of social expenditure, causing extreme hardship for the poor (Humphreys 2002). The Syrian civil war has created new opportunities for corruption for the government, armed groups, and the private sector. The regime has reinforced its network and patronage by allocating public resources and implementing policies to benefit favoured industries and companies (Freedom House 2019).

During 2019 Syrians faced a year of consecutive crises that included the gas crisis, the heating fuel crisis, and the auto fuel crisis which started in April 2019 and completely crippled movement in the streets in most of the country (Morgan 2020).The situation rapidly deteriorated in a few months' time, as most Syrians started to feel the effects of the economic crisis in Lebanon that affected bank deposits and money transfers, as well as making it difficult or even impossible to source goods (Morgan 2020). During the last week of 2019 prices increased by 50 per cent for many basic food stuffs (Morgan 2020), and the value of the Syrian currency dropped from 600 Syrian liras to around 940 pounds during the last week of 2019, for one US dollar (Xinhua 2020).

4.3.2   *International economic violence*

The international community uses sanctions and trade embargoes as a foreign policy weapon. This can have lethal consequences and disproportionally affect the most vulnerable sectors of society. Economic sanctions imposed by the international community to alter the policies of foreign governments are currently targeting Syria and Iran.

In the case of Syria, sanctions have been imposed on various economic sectors, including energy and financial transactions (Mehchy 2019b). On 20 December 2019 the United States President signed into law the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, providing for sanctions and travel restrictions on those supporting members of the Assad regime. These sanctions increased the cost of imports and therefore raised demand for foreign currencies remittances, estimated at $4,5 million per day. Foreign investments and exports were negatively affected and the supply side of hard currencies inside Syria was reduced (Mehchy 2019b), affecting the lives of millions of citizens already fragile due to nine years of conflict.

On 20 September 2019 the US President announced a new round of sanctions against Iran's national bank, putting under further pressure the economic stability of the country (Sullivan 2019). In his words, the Iranian regime had been targeted by 'the highest level of economic sanctions' by the USA since 2018. These sanctions have had an important economic impact on the country and the government's economic and fiscal policy. The cancellation of fuel subsidies triggered extensive protests in November 2019 (BBC 2019). According to the World Bank, the inflation rate on food items has increased dramatically, particularly affecting people living in rural areas (BBC 2019). Doubts have been expressed about the efficiency of sanctions to alter policies. However, their negative impact on the lives of ordinary civilians is manifest (BBC 2019), especially the most vulnerable. These sanctions have directly impacted the 3 million Afghan refugees in Iran and the 10 million Iranians affected by the destructive 2019 floods. According to the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), the sanctions imposed by the US on Iran were so comprehensive that banks were unwilling to facilitate transfers for humanitarian work (NRC Iran 2019).

4.3.3   Collateral economic violence

For decades aid agencies have been accused of worsening the situation in countries undergoing conflict, not only because they generally work in contexts in which the whole system is corrupted, but also due to their need to often cooperate with perpetrators of human rights violations in order to allow the delivery of aid to local communities (Humphreys 2002). We will examine how humanitarian aid is used for economic violence in Yemen and Syria.

In Yemen the war ravaging the country has transformed it into a humanitarian disaster marked by widespread hunger, a cholera epidemic, and economic collapse (Slemrod 2020). According to recent UN figures, 80 per cent of Yemen's 24 million population need humanitarian assistance (Lee 2020). Humanitarian aid response has long been plagued by accusations of interference by both rival sides claiming that a significant amount of money and supplies are wasted and that projects and contracts are influenced by political factors (Slemrod 2020). In 2019 the Supreme Council for Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation managed by the Houthis issued a decree that would require two percent of all non-governmental organisation (NGO) aid budgets to go to the authorities (Lee 2020). The tax that has been proposed to cover the costs of transporting aid to civilians instead may likely be used as funding for the war (Lee 2020). In June 2019 the World Food Programme announced that it would suspend its operations in Houthi-controlled areas if the group does not agree to implement a biometrics system expected to prevent aid fraud (The New Humanitarian 2019). The lack of action to solve the problem of aid operation left 850 000

of Sana'a population without food and aid until the Houthis agreed to the conditions of international aid (Slemrod 2020). Bureaucracy, obstruction and interference are another factor in the struggle of the aid operation in Yemen. According to UN figures, the number of incidents from restrictions on movement to violence against aid workers increased from 299 to 502 between June and September 2019 throughout the country (Slemrod 2020).

In Syria, due to the nine years of ongoing civil war, more than 80 per cent of people today live below the poverty line (Makki 2018). Humanitarian aid reportedly was extended or withheld based on recipients' demonstration of political loyalty to the government (Freedom House 2019). 'According to the United Nations, government forces did not approve half of their requests to humanitarian missions nor help with monitoring, assessing and accompanying aid deliveries, and providing security, logistics and administrative support' (Amnesty International 2019e). In Rukban camp near the border with Jordan, humanitarian access was obstructed, despite the dire humanitarian conditions (Amnesty International 2019). Approximately 18 000 individuals left the camp for government-held areas. Evacuees had to pay for their evacuation, and they ended up in displacement centres. Those lacking financial resources or unable to secure transportation out of Rukban remained behind (Human Rights Watch 2020c). Corruption is also widespread in opposition-held areas. Some rebel commanders have been accused of looting, extortion and theft. Local administrators and activists complain that little of the international aid that is given to opposition representatives abroad seems to reach them, raising suspicions of illicit gains (Freedom House 2019).

5   Conclusion

Unprecedented mobilisations, in their scale, pacifism, creativity, and resilience, marked 2019, unravelling in a context of deteriorating socio-economic conditions and saturation from decades of authoritarianism, corruption and contempt. Young people and women played a leading role in challenging exclusionary powers. The number and extent of the protests movements seem to announce a second Arab Spring. Massive demonstrations took hold in six countries across the region, some bringing about the fall of the military leader and kicking off a transitional process, while others brought down the civilian government without the adoption of a clear road map that would reform the political system.

Protests across the region were met with varying degrees of violence, sometimes quelling the uprising and at other times accompanying the transition. Indeed, governments and political forces in many countries across the region consolidated their power through different means: resorting to direct repressive actions against the opposition through

the police and tribunals, or resorting to more sophisticated methods such as shifting the institutional power balance through constitutional amendments or introducing legal instruments to subvert constitutional principles, such as counter-terrorism laws, state of emergency laws and anti-cyber-criminality legislation.

The continuation of wars and violent conflicts in many countries, added to the economic challenges that many of these countries face, has considerably increased the vulnerability of many sectors of their population, notably women, children, the stateless, refugees and displaced persons. We have also looked into how economic violence is used by national and international actors to serve their purposes and how it invariably negatively impacts the most vulnerable sectors of society.

The democratic consolidation in Tunisia and the democratic transitions in Algeria, Sudan and Mauritania offer models and lessons to other countries in the region. In Sudan and Algeria protest movements became increasingly structured over time, were able to deal with the military institutions that removed the President, and succeeded in engaging the military in a transitional process. In countries such as Lebanon and Iraq the popular movements that broke out in September led to the resignation of the governments but not yet to a transitional process, while in the war-torn countries of the region very few signs of a peace transition were apparent. Only the coming year will tell in which direction the many transitions witnessed in 2019 will go, towards democratic or authoritarian consolidation.

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