Moving Beyond the Modernization Paradigm: Rethinking the Dominant Narratives of Libya's Failed Democratic Transition

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Abstract: common explanations attribute the failure of democratization in post-Gaddafi Libya to four main factors. The first is the nature of the pre-2011 political regime—commonly referred to as the Gaddafi legacy—which left behind weak institutions and entrenched authoritarian norms. The second factor is the social structure of Libyan society, often analyzed primarily through the lens of tribalism, which is seen as a barrier to national cohesion. The third is the absence of a democratic political culture, the weakness of civil society, and the lack of experience with political parties. The fourth is foreign interference, which further undermined the transition and deepened internal divisions. While these factors offer important insights, this paper argues that their explanatory power remains limited in two key respects. First, most mainstream analyses rely on modernization theory as a normative paradigm, linking democratization to the presence of objective preconditions while downplaying the role of agency and offering ahistorical interpretations of Libya's social transformations prior to 2011. Second, such analyses do not adequately distinguish between the role of objective pre-conditions in enabling the emergence of democracy and their influence on the strategic choices of political actors—choices that can either support a transition toward democracy or, as in Libya's case, contribute to state division and civil war.

1. Introduction

The uprisings known as the "Arab Spring," which began in late 2010, brought significant social and political changes to several countries across the Middle East and North Africa. While some succeeded in toppling authoritarian leaders, most fell short of the high expectations that accompanied this wave of popular mobilization. Indeed, the uprisings failed to establish democratic alternatives, expand civil rights and liberties, or deliver meaningful economic and social reforms. Outcomes ranged from limited political changes (Morocco, Jordan, Algeria) to the resurgence of authoritarianism (Egypt, Tunisia), and in some cases, full-scale civil wars (Libya, Yemen, Syria).

In Libya, [1] following the fall of the authoritarian Gaddafi regime in October 2011—sparked by a popular uprising in February that quickly evolved into a NATO-backed armed rebellion—the country appeared to be on a path toward democratization. Early signs of this transition included the Constitutional Declaration[2] issued by the National Transitional Council (NTC) [3] in August 2011, which, despite a challenging security environment, paved the way for the election of the General National Congress (GNC) in 2012, widely regarded as free and fair. [4]

The GNC elections resulted in a politically diverse body, with the National Forces Alliance (NFA) winning 39 of 80 party-list seats, followed by the Justice and Construction Party (the Muslim Brotherhood's political wing) with 17 seats, and smaller parties sharing the remaining 24. Additionally, 120 seats were filled by independents.[5] However, the GNC soon became a site of intense political polarization, which peaked with the passage of the Political Isolation

[1] The Libyan case has a set of characteristics that distinguish it from other cases that witnessed similar political and social unrest as a result of the repercussions of the so-called Arab Spring. These can be summarized in four points: First, Libya was the only case in which the international community invoked the principle of the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) through UN Security Council Resolution 1973 to protect civilians. However, this soon evolved into a military campaign to overthrow the Gaddafi regime, which included even arming opposition fighters. Second, Libya was the first case where peaceful protests escalated into an armed rebellion and civil war, driven initially by the regime's repression and extreme violence against demonstrators in the early days of the uprising. Third, Libya was also the first country in which prominent officials who defected from the regime at the start of the uprising formed the first political body to lead opposition forces both politically and militarily. Fourth, Libya became the first example where revolutionaries who had fought against the regime for its human rights abuses later committed serious human rights violations themselves.

[2] The Interim National Transitional Council, *The Constitutional Declaration*, August 3, 2011, https://tinyurl.com/22x4rc2s

[3] The National Transitional Council (NTC) was established in February 2011 through consensus among municipal councils in areas considered "liberated" from official authorities' rule. It consisted of a political coalition that included former officials who defected from the Gaddafi regime, members of the Libyan opposition in exile, tribal leaders, urban notables, academics, lawyers, and human rights activists, with very limited representation of women. The council was headed by former Minister of Justice Mustafa Abdul Jalil. Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, the Libyan national transitional council: social bases, membership and political trends, al Jazeera center for studies, November 30, 2011, https://tinyurl.com/5evcxkmw , pp. 4-5.

[4] "European Union Election Assessment Team in Libya. Final report-General National Congress Election – 2012, https://tinyurl.com/3jw68c29

[5] Despite the lack of a clear ideological orientation within the National Forces Alliance—which is sometimes labelled as liberal and at other times as nationalist—the ideological background is more clearly defined within the Islamist led by the Justice and Construction Party, its Salafist allies, and other religious figures. See: Karim Mezran, Fadel Lamen and Eric Knecht, "Post-revolutionary Politics in Libya: Inside the General National Congress," Atlantic Council, 2013, p.1.

Law in May 2013. [6] Intended to exclude former regime officials from political life, the law was widely seen as a setback to the democratic transition and a return to authoritarian practices. Its implementation effectively stripped the country of much of its professional and technocratic expertise.

By mid-2014, the political landscape had further deteriorated. The GNC extended its mandate beyond its legal term and refused to recognize the newly elected House of Representatives (HoR), elected in June 2014. The electoral outcome, which seemed unfavourable to Islamist and revolutionary forces dominant in the GNC, [7] sparked a legitimacy crisis that escalated into a full-scale civil war and nationwide political and institutional division. Two rival governments and parliaments emerged—one in Tobruk and the other in Tripoli—each backed by its own military factions and foreign allies.

This sequence of events reveals a stark contradiction between the initial optimism inspired by early democratic milestones—such as the GNC and HoR elections, the Constitutional Committee elections, the embrace of multipartyism, and the rise of civil society organizations —and the country's rapid descent into full-scale civil war. How has the Dominant literature explained this contradiction? What are the limitations of such explanations?

2. Common Explanations for Libya's failed Democratic Transition

Academic literature and policy analyses commonly attribute the failure of Libya's post-Gaddafi democratic transition to four main factors: the legacy of weak institutions and authoritarian norms left by the Gaddafi regime; deep-rooted tribal, ethnic, and regional divisions that hinder national cohesion; the absence of a democratic political culture and a weak civil society; and foreign interference, which further destabilized the transition and exacerbated internal divisions.

A. The nature of the Libyan state pre-2011 or Gaddafi's Legacy

Explanations that emphasize the nature of the Libyan state prior to 2011 often highlight its historical institutional fragility, particularly under Gaddafi's idiosyncratic system of governance, which relied on hundreds of so-called "People's Committees" and "People's Congresses", along with numerous ineffective regulatory bodies, rather than a coherent institutional framework. [8] This institutional weakness is attributed to Gaddafi's strategy of divide and rule, often described as fostering 'orchestrated chaos."[9] Similarly, George Joffé claims that after the fall of the Senussi monarchy (1951–1969), Libya entered a state of

[6] It was later expanded to include anyone who had been a member of any governmental organization or had served within official state institutions. see: General National Congress – Libya, "Law No. (13) of 2013 on administrative and political isolation", May 8, 2013, https://tinyurl.com/2zzh4y5x

[7] For more details on how the Islamists and their allies came to dominate the GNC, see: Ali Bin Musa, "The 2012 General National Congress Elections in Libya: An Analysis of Electoral Dynamics and Implications." *Siyasat Arabiya* 12, no. 70 (Sep 2024): 82-100.

[8] Jean-Louis Romanet Perroux, " The Deep Roots of Libya's Security Fragmentation", *Middle Eastern Studies* 55, no. 2 (Jan 2019), p. 201.

[9] Emanuela Paoletti, "Libya: Roots of a Civil Conflict", *Mediterranean Politics* 16, no. 2 (July 2011), p. 317.

"statelessness,"[10]. The *Jamahiriya*, or "state of the masses," promoted by Gaddafi, further dismantled bureaucratic efficiency and undermined the building of state institutions.

Philippe Droz-Vincent characterized the Libyan state in 2011 by its 'complete absence of a national institutional framework,' the result of a long neglect of institutionalization. The *Jamahiriya*, he argued, was not realistically a state but a chaotic patchwork of local structures run through tribal and familial patronage.[11]

In this context, the swift transformation of the 2011 uprising into an armed rebellion led by hundreds of militias is less surprising. The collapse of central authority exposed a profound security vacuum, prompting many scholars to focus on the legacy of Libya's pre-2011 military and security structures. Tibi Ghamari notes that after a failed coup attempt in 1975, Gaddafi deliberately weakened the formal armed forces through inadequate training, politicized promotions, and constant rotations in leadership. In parallel, he built powerful security units loyal to his inner circle—such as the 32nd Brigade led by his son Khamis and the National Security Agency under Mutassim—while also relying on militias drawn from loyal tribes like the Gaddadfa, Magarha, and Warfalla. [12]

Although the official army was nominally 76,000 strong before the uprising, only about 20,000 were in active service. This deliberate marginalization of the national army had severe consequences during the transitional period. With no unified and disciplined force to ensure security, transitional authorities were forced to depend on armed groups—despite widespread recognition of the risks. Over time, these militias became entrenched and legitimized, operating independently of state authority. As Alison Pargeter observes, the post-Gaddafi state found itself effectively at the mercy of militias, which filled the security void left by the regime's failure to develop robust national defense and security institutions. [13]

B. **Tribalism as a barrier to national cohesion**

Several scholars, political analysts, and journalists claim that Libya is a tribal society, [14] to the point that it is "nearly impossible to understand Libyan politics and society without considering

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[10] جورج جوفيه، "الانتقال السياسي في شمال إفريقيا"، في إكرام عدنني وآخرون، **الانتخابات والانتقال الديمقراطي مقاربات مقارنة**، تحرير محرز الدريسي، (الدوحة/ بيروت: المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات، 2019)، ص 235.

[11] Philippe Droz-Vincent , "Deconstructing its Weak Sovereign State with a Fateful Drift Toward Chaos?", *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, no. 3 (May 2018), pp. 436-437.

[12] طيبي غماري، **الجندي والدولة والثورات العربية** (الدوحة/بيروت: المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات، 2019)، ص 99-103.

[13] أليسون بارجيتر، "عقبات أمام الانتقال الديمقراطي في ليبيا"، في عدنني وآخرون، **الانتخابات**، ص 344-345.

[14] R.B.StJohn, "The Post-Qadhafi Economy," in Jason pack (eds.), *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future* (New York: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2013) p.100; Yahia H Zoubir and Erzsébet N Rózsa, "The End of the Libyan Dictatorship: The Uncertain Transition", *Third World Quarterly* 33, no. 7 (July 2012) p.1269; Mohamed Ben Lamma, "The Tribal Structure in Libya: Factor for fragmentation or cohesion." *Fondation pour la recherche stratégique* (2017), p. 4; Al-Hamzeh Al-Shadeedi and Nancy Ezzedine, "Libyan tribes in the shadow of war and peace", Clingendael (2019), pp. 1-12; Thomas L. Friedman, "Tribes with flags", *New York times*, March 22, 2011. https://tinyurl.com/2hwcnwff

مصطفى عمر التير، **صراع الخيمة والقصر رؤية نقدية للمشروع الحداثي الليبي** (بيروت: منتدى المعارف، 2014)، ص 112.

the role of tribes".[15] One estimate suggests that there are approximately 140 tribes and large families in Libya that hold political significance. [16]

Tribalism is often perceived as a timeless feature of Libyan society, despite the social transformations that followed the discovery and export of oil in the mid-1960s. Leveraging increased revenues, the two post-independence states launched modernization programs in education, healthcare, transportation, and housing, spawning an educated middle class that was visible in student and labor unions, cultural clubs, and women's associations—particularly in coastal urban areas. Yet most analyses continue to assume that tribal dynamics still underpin Libya's political life, shaping administrative appointments and recruitment into the security forces.

Thus, tribalism in Libya is seen as an organic and deeply rooted political, social, and cultural identity that determine individual and communal affiliations, often perceived as conflicting with loyalty to the nation-state and citizenship. Analyses of tribal divisions are often linked to divisions along other identity lines, particularly regional or ethnic, while social class-based divisions are completely absent from such analyses.

Even as Libya's urban population rose to 82% in 2023,[17] a Libyan sociologist contends that tribal affiliations remain strong. Urban growth, driven by internal migration from rural areas rather than natural urban expansion, brought tribal norms into cities rather than displacing them.[18]

One of the most controversial theses, presented by a German scholar known for his prolific work on Libya, introduces a new dichotomy that characterizes the Libyan civil war and the rise of tribal politics in the post-2011 period as a struggle between "tribal hinterlands" and "urban revolutionary." [19] [20]

highlighting the fragmented nature of Libyan society, Analysts often cite the military clashes that erupted between 2012 and 2014 along seemingly tribal, regional, or ethnic lines, including

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[15] Haala Hweio, "Tribes in Libya: From Social Organization to Political Power", *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2012), p.117.

[16] Wiesław LIZAK, "LIBYA – ROAD TO DYSFUNCTIONALITY," *Politeja* 56, (2018), p. 27.

[17] World bank, Urban population (% of total population) – Libya, https://tinyurl.com/yj2a55at

[18] التير، صراع الخيمة والقصر رؤية نقدية للمشروع الحداثي الليبي، ص ص. 98-105.

[19] Wolfram Lacher, " The Rise of Tribal Politics", Jason pack (eds.), *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle for the Post-Qadhafi Future*, pp. 152, 158, 166, 168.

[20] Anthropologist Igor Cherstich argues that Lacher's hypothesis overlooks the continued presence of tribal identity in urban centers like Benghazi—one of the epicentres of the uprising and Libya's second-largest city by population—rendering his dichotomy misleading. By framing the conflict as a binary between "tribal" and "revolutionary militias" with nationalist or Islamist aspirations, Lacher also ignores the fact that many urban revolutionary militias possess a strong tribal component. Cherstich cites the Zintan militias—some of which cooperated with the liberal-nationalist leaning National Forces Alliance—and the Misratan militias, which maintained close ties with the Muslim Brotherhood. While Cherstich's point about Zintan is valid, in Misrata, tribal affiliation is only one facet of a broader network of kinship relations. Familial ties, neighborhood connections, and friendships also play significant roles in social and military mobilization, shaped by the city's urbanization and the diversity of its social fabric—which includes urbanites, Diverse tribal composition, and even some non-Arab ethnic groups such as the Circassians and Kouloughlis. See: Igor Cherstich, "When Tribesmen do not act Tribal: Libyan Tribalism as Ideology (not as Schizophrenia)", *Middle East Critique* 23, no. 4 (2014), p. 406. Also see note no (7) and (9).

clashes between tribal militias from Zawiya and Warshafana; in Sebha, between the Awlad Sulayman and Warfalla tribes and the Gaddadfa tribe; between the Zintan and Mashashiya tribes;[21] and between the Tebu and Tuareg in Kufra (2011), Sebha (2012), and Ubari (2014).[22] These clashes are frequently discussed alongside the separatist tendencies that emerged in eastern Libya in early 2012.[23]

C. political culture

Libya's prevailing political culture is widely seen as a barrier to democratization, characterized by exclusionary attitudes, a lack of elements that promote political participation and initiative, [24] and low levels of trust. [25] Scholars argue that the weakness of civil society has reinforced a conservative political culture marked by exclusion—particularly of women from political participation—due to the socially conservative nature of Libyan society. [26] By 2000, only 39 state-affiliated civil society organizations existed; although this number grew to 4,500 by 2012, most remained structurally weak and financially dependent on the state or foreign donors.[27] Moreover, newly established political parties have failed to play an active role in transforming the prevailing political culture. Decades of bans on party activity have resulted in weak and disorganized entities that remain marginal in national politics, many of which reflect narrow regional, tribal, or ideological interests.[28]

D. Foreign interference

NATO's military intervention was a decisive external factor in the success of the Libyan uprising that ended Gaddafi's 42-year rule. However, its aftermath proved disastrous. The fallout became more pronounced following the 2013 military coup in Egypt, which overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated President Mohammed Morsi. Developments in Egypt quickly reverberated in Libya, deepening the polarization between the two main blocs in the GNC: the NFA and the revolutionary-Islamist bloc. Since then, Libya has become a theatre of regional rivalries, with Egypt, the UAE, and later Russia backing the camp led by military commander Khalifa Haftar and the HOR. In contrast, Türkiye and Qatar supported the GNC, which was dominated by Islamists and revolutionary factions. Meanwhile, international

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[21] Perroux, " The Deep Roots of Libya's Security Fragmentation" , pp. 213-214.

[22] Szczepakiewicz-Ruzdka, "patterns of libya's instability in the aftermath of the collapse of gaddafi's regime", *Politeja* 3, no. 42 (2016), pp. 238-239.

[23] Despite hosting the country's most important oil export ports, eastern Liby's region—historically known as Cyrenaica—suffered marginalization and neglect under the Gaddafi regime, as did many other regions. Yet it was Cyrenaica that sparked the 2011 uprising. On 6 March 2012, a coalition of social forces—primarily rural tribal elders and armed groups—declared regional autonomy by establishing the Cyrenaica Regional Transitional Council. Although its leader, Ahmed al-Zubeir, sat on the National Transitional Council (NTC), the new body had no formal links with either the NTC or the local councils in the regions it sought to govern. Its supporters recognized that their only path to legitimacy lay in invoking Cyrenaica's historical status as a largely autonomous province between 1951 and 1963, during Libya's federal monarchy. Issam Fetouri, "Libyan leader says autonomy call a foreign plot," *Reuters*, March 6, 2012, https://reut.rs/408kWbL.

[24] يوسف محمد جمعة الصواني، **ليبيا الثورة وتحديات بناء الدولة** (بيروت: مركز دراسات الوحدة العربية، 2013)، ص 189.

[25] زاهي المغيربي ونجيب الحصادي، "التحول الديمقراطي في ليبيا: تحديات ومآلات وفرص"، في عدنني وآخرون، **الانتخابات**، ص 310.

[26] Jason William Boose, "Democratization and Civil Society: Libya, Tunisia and the Arab Spring", *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 2, no. 4 (July 2012), p. 311.

[27] SZCZEPANKIEWICZ-RUDZKA, "PATTERNS", p. 229

[28] الصواني، **ليبيا الثورة وتحديات بناء الدولة**، ص 157.

powers—including the United States, Britain, France, and Italy—oscillated between direct support (financial, military, political, and diplomatic) for one side and pressuring the warring parties to accept political settlements that would preserve their interests. Libya's neighboring countries—Tunisia, Algeria, Mali, Chad, Niger, and Sudan—have played only a marginal role.[29]

In this context, Mieczyslaw Poduszynski examines the failure of the international powers to support Libya's democratic transition, identifying two main obstacles. First, external efforts focused on political support and security consultations but neglected building democratic institutions. Additionally, Libya's oil wealth further weakened external influence, as armed groups profited from state revenues, making economic aid or trade incentives ineffective in encouraging disarmament or political compromise.[30]

Second, the international powers supporting democracy—particularly Western countries—lacked strong ties with Libyan society, which harbors deep-rooted hostility toward the West due to its experience with Italian colonialism anti-Western ideology promoted by the Gaddafi regime. Furthermore, the unstable security environment following the 2011 uprising further hindered Libyan political elites and civil society from engaging meaningfully with the "democratic knowledge" they were expected to acquire through enhanced commercial, cultural, and economic relations with Western states.[31]

3. Revisiting dominant explanation

I argue that the literature reviewed above predominantly employs structural approaches—particularly modernization theory—as the theoretical framework for analyzing social and political change. These approaches emphasize the role of macro-level political, social, economic, and cultural structures as objective factors that determine the trajectory of democratization.

Although modernization theory—pioneered by American sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s—has faced criticism, particularly for its limited applicability to non-Western and post-colonial contexts, [32] it remains dominant in both Western and non-Western academic circles.

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[29] See: Karim Mezran and Elissa Miller, " Libya: From Intervention to Proxy War", Atlantic Council (July 2017), pp. 1-10; وكذلك: أحمد حسين، "دور القوى الخارجية في الانتقال الديمقراطي: حالة ليبيا بعد اتفاق الصخيرات"، في أحمد إدعلي وآخرون، **العامل الخارجي والانتقال الديمقراطي في البلدان العربية**، تحرير عبد الفتاح ماضي، سلسلة دراسات التحول الديمقراطي (بيروت: المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات، 2021) ، ص459-485.

[30] Mieczysław P. Boduszyński, " The external dimension of Libya's troubled transition: the international community and 'democratic knowledge' transfer", *The Journal of North African Studies* 20, no. 5 (October 2015), pp. 736-737.

[31] Ibid.

[32] See the insightful critique by Ali Abdul Latif Ahmida of the application of modernization theory to Maghreb social history—particularly Libya—in: Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *Forgotten Voices Power and Agency in Colonial and Postcolonial Libya* (New York; Oxon: Routledge, 2005). especially pp. 68–74. Ahmida, *GENOCIDE IN LIBYA Shar, a Hidden Colonial History* (York; Oxon: Routledge, 2021). Also see his critical introductions in: Ahmida, *THE MAKING OF MODERN LIBYA State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance* 2nd ed (New York: State University of New York Press, 2009); Ahmida (eds.), *BEYOND COLONIALISM AND NATIONALISM IN THE MAGHRIB* 2nd ed (New York: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2009).

A cornerstone of this theoretical orientation is Seymour Lipset's seminal work, *Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy*, which remains a foundational application of modernization theory in explaining the emergence of democracy in modern nation-states. [33]

Building on Lipset's thesis, subsequent studies have continued to posit that increasing industrialization leads to economic growth, reflected in rising per capita GDP, urbanization, literacy rates, and the spread of modern communication technologies. These transformations are seen as catalysts for social change, driving demands for more representative political systems capable of protecting the interests of emerging social groups, particularly the middle classes. Over time, these demands expand to include broader political rights, such as suffrage and political participation. [34] Complementing this perspective, other studies have examined how societal and economic modernization reshapes political culture, value and norms systems. [35]

Scholars have also broadened structural approaches by incorporating other factors such as state size, colonial legacy, and levels of institutional development. Additionally, variables such as economic dependency, globalization, democratic diffusion, and the role of international and regional organizations have been partly conceptualized as structural factors.[36]

Despite this broadening of scope, the structural approach to democratization continues to adhere to two core principles. First, it assigns causal primacy to structural factors in transitioning to democracy. Second, it downplays the role of agency and the strategic choices of political elites and social actors—stakeholders—in either consolidating or obstructing democratization.

Historical evidence increasingly challenges the notion that structural factors serve as inevitable determinants of democratization. High levels of material modernization—especially rapid industrialization and urbanization—have not consistently resulted in the emergence of democratic regimes. In some cases, it had contributed to the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe, such as Nazism, fascism, and Stalinism.[37] Outside Europe, Barrington Moore's comparative historical and class-based analysis—contrasting the development of democracy in India with the rise of communism in China and fascism in Japan—offers further compelling evidence.[38]

Moreover, some quantitative studies reinforce the argument that the relationship between economic growth and democratic transition is correlational rather than causal. In fact, increasing rates of economic growth and wealth have been associated with both democratic

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[33] Seymour Martin Lipset, " Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy", *The American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (March 1959), pp. 69-105.
[34] Sujian Guo, "Democratic Transition: A Critical Overview", *Issues & Studies* 35, no. 4 (July/August 1999), pp. 134-135.
[35] Gabriel Almond, Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton, N.J: Prince University Press, 1963); Jim Granato, Ronald Inglehart and David Leblang," Cultural Values, Stable Democracy, and Economic development: A Reply," *American Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 3(August 1996), pp. 680-696.
[36] Jan teorell, *Determinants of Democratization Explaining Regime Change in the World, 1972–2006* (Cambridge: cambridge university press, 2010), pp. 17-18.
[37] HANNAH ARENDT, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Florida: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1951).
[38] Barrington Moore, Jr, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in The Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), chap 4,5,6.

and authoritarian outcomes [39]. This has led scholars to identify a new typology of regimes—so-called "authoritarian developmental regimes"—in which authoritarian governments achieve high economic growth and social welfare without transitioning to democracy.[40]

Considering such limitations, growing attention has also been paid to non-material factors—such as political culture, value belief systems—that shape political behavior and its interpretation. Religious traditions have been central to this debate. While Protestant Christianity is often viewed as hospitable to democracy, Catholicism in earlier periods, and Islam in contemporary discourse, have frequently been portrayed as resistant or even hostile to democratic values.[41]

Nevertheless, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the relationship between specific cultural patterns and democratization. Cultural systems are not static; they can evolve over time, adapting to changing socioeconomic conditions that may, in some historical contexts, support democratization while, in others, reinforcing authoritarianism. For example, although long regarded as inhospitable to democracy, Catholic church later played a pivotal role in opposing authoritarian regimes, both in Latin America and in Poland during the 1980s. Similarly, several Muslim-majority countries—such as Senegal, Indonesia, and Türkiye—have made notable progress toward democratization, albeit primarily at the electoral rather than the liberal level.

In the Libyan case, the literature reviewed often draws a causal link between pre-existing structural factors and the prospects for democratization. While such factors are central for the stability of democratization, the distinction between their role in initiating democratization and their influence on shaping the strategic choices made by political actors was overlooked. Notably, Libya's pre-2011 socioeconomic indicators—high GDP, small population, ethnic and religious homogeneity, urbanization, and literacy—were comparatively favorable and aligned with the assumptions of structural approaches to democratization than many other cases.

Much of the literature on Libya's democratic transition draws on dominant typologies of authoritarian regimes, with Gaddafi's rule typically classified as a personalist authoritarian regime. [42] Personalist regimes are defined as "autocracies in which discretion over policy and personnel is concentrated in the hands of one man, military or civilian." [43] Such regimes are characterized by a lack of institutional constraints on the leader, such as a professional army or an organized political party capable of negotiating with the opposition for a peaceful transfer of power. Without clear institutional rules for managing transitions and succession, their

[39] See for example: Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, "Modernization: Theories and Facts", *World Politics* 49, no. 2 (January 1997), pp.155-183.

[40] GEORG SØRENSEN, *Democracy and Democratization: Processes and Prospects in a Changing World*, 3rd ed (Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2008) pp. 112-118.

[41] See: Terry Lynn Karl, " Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America", *Comparative Politics* 23, no. 1 (October 1990), pp.3-4; Fareed Zakaria, "Islam, democracy, and constitutional liberalism." *Political science quarterly* 119, no. 1 (2004): pp. 1-20; Samuel P. Huntington, "Will more countries become democratic?" *Political science quarterly* 99, no. 2 (1984), pp.193-218.

[42] Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz present a comprehensive dataset in their work, providing transitional data on 280 authoritarian regimes between 1946 and 2010. Their typology of authoritarian regimes includes monarchy, personalistic, single-party, oligarchy, direct and indirect military, based on factors such as the types of elites active in the ruling regime, the method of leadership selection, the regime's degree of control over the security apparatus, and the extent to which ruling elites can constrain the leader's decisions. Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set," *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 2 (June 2014), pp. 313-331.

[43] Ibid, p. 319.

collapse often leads to renewed dictatorship, civil war, or state failure. [44] However, can Gaddafi's Libya accurately be considered a 'stateless society'?

Despite the weakness of the Weberian traditions of the modern Libyan state—due to its late formation as a post-colonial entity and the fragility of its institutional structures—the claim that Libya was a stateless society is an exaggeration. Even in the classical Weberian sense, Libya qualified as a state, with a central authority capable of monopolizing violence within its internationally recognized territories, a bureaucratic apparatus of salaried administrative employees, and the ability to provide basic services to its citizens, most notably security,[45] free healthcare, and education.

An ahistorical reading of the *Jamahiriya*, detached from Libya's social and historical context, often reduces its history solely to Gaddafi's rule. However, during its first decade (1969–1979), the *Jamahiriya* enjoyed broad support from urban middle classes, rural lower classes, and women by implementing socioeconomic reforms funded by high oil revenues. [46] These reforms provided stable employment, free education and healthcare, subsidies for basic needs, and improved housing. Although authoritarian-populist in nature, the *Jamahiriya* initially sought to address Libya's structural political challenges—including the legacy of fascist colonialism, the weakness of the monarchy, and entrenched regional identities—before eventually devolving into a highly repressive and corrupt personalist regime.

Such reform policies contributed to preserving a unified Libyan national identity linked to the state, even if it was occasionally overshadowed by ethnic, regional, tribal, affiliations. At the same time, such affiliations were politicized in response to the shifting dynamics between the state and society.

In the final decade of the Jamahiriya (2000–2010), particularly after the normalization of relations with Western countries and the lifting of international sanctions, Libya achieved notable human development outcomes despite persistent corruption and unemployment. Literacy rates reached 88%, average life expectancy rose to 76 years, and the 2010 United Nations Human Development Index ranked Libya first in Africa and 53rd globally. [47] This raises critical questions about how a so-called stateless society attained such levels of development. The high literacy and urbanization rates indicate that Libyan society underwent a degree of modernization—albeit incomplete and largely absent in the political sphere—which reshaped social structures and the traditional role of tribalism.

Despite the tribes' strong social presence, their political influence was less significant than often portrayed in post-2011 analyses, which tend to conflate their historical role with later

[44] Ibid, p. 321.

[45] Even if the security apparatuses under Gaddafi were repressive and primarily served to protect the political regime—particularly Gaddafi himself—much like those in other authoritarian regiems, especially personalist, regimes, the claim that Libya lacked professional security institutions is, at best, an exaggeration. Which institutions secured the country's vast territory? How was public order and societal security maintained? How was illegal migration from the Libyan coast to Europe controlled? And how was the monopoly on violence sustained in Libya for forty-two years? For more details on the role of the army and security institutions in authoritarian regimes see: Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz, *how dictatorships work: Power, personalization, and collapse*(Cambridge :Cambridge University Press, 2018), chap 7.

[46] Ahmida, *Forgotten Voices Power and Agency in Colonial and Postcolonial Libya,* chap 6 "THE JAMAHIRIYYA: HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL ORIGINS OF A POPULIST STATE".

[47] United Nations Human Development Programme. Human Development Report 2010: 20th Anniversary Edition. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.)

political instrumentalization. Historical evidence supports this distinction, notably in the period following the monarchy's overthrow (1969–1976), when the Revolutionary Command Council systematically dismantled tribal alliances. This was motivated both ideologically, as the regime adopted a pan-Arabist (Nasserist) agenda aimed at transcending narrow social affiliations like tribalism, and tactically, to exclude tribal notables previously loyal to the monarchy from state institutions.

When Gaddafi consolidated power in the mid-1980s, Libya was increasingly isolated regionally and internationally due to its confrontational foreign policy, culminating in its designation as a state sponsor of terrorism. This isolation was compounded by a sharp decline in oil revenues, military defeat in Chad in 1987, coup attempts, and an Islamist insurgency. In response, Gaddafi launched a policy of re-tribalization in 1993, formalizing the role of tribal leaders under the name "popular leaderships" to manage relations between tribes and the state, resolve disputes, implement development plans, and ensure loyalty to the regime. However, this strategy aimed more at undermining internal opposition than recognizing the political importance of tribes—especially since Gaddafi's own tribe, the Gaddadfa, was small and lacked influence. To compensate, he forged alliances with larger tribes such as the Warfalla, Magarha, and Barasa (his wife's tribe). These efforts were part of a broader "de-urbanization" policy that sought to weaken the educated urban middle class by promoting traditional rural and tribal rituals and values related to dress, music, and festivals.[48]

Despite the revival of tribal politics, tribal identity did not dominate political mobilization during the February 17 uprising. Even in rural areas, the concept of "tribe" had evolved. Most Libyans had become increasingly integrated into the national oil-based economy, and the leading figures of the revolution were primarily drawn mainly from civil forces—judges, lawyers, academics, journalists, women's rights activists, youth social media activists and defected military officers, and —rather than traditional tribal leaders or notables. Armed groups, at least initially, were not organized along strictly tribal or regional lines but rather "based on neighborhoods or connections with preexisting networks, as in the case of military units formed by groups with religious connotations." [49]

Following the collapse of central authority, the absence of strong, functioning state institutions allowed tribal leaders to assume a more prominent role in Libya's political landscape. However, tribes were unable to establish substantial political influence because state institutions were too weak to provide the necessary support. This likely explains the marginal role of tribes in key national issues such as peace building, mediation, transitional justice, and national reconciliation.

Defining power alliances in the Libyan conflict along tribal, regional, or ethnic lines is challenging. Intense competition over state resources and institutions—combined with a lucrative war economy fueled by the looting of state assets, smuggling, and the illicit trafficking of weapons, humans, and fuel—has fostered flexible, pragmatic, and interest-driven alliances. Analyses that reduce actors to fixed "political identities" or uncritically adopt grievance- or greed-based models overlook the capacity of individuals and groups to shift alliances and affiliations, and even to reshape their identities to serve strategic interests.

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[48] علي عبد اللطيف احميدة، "دولة ما بعد الاستعمار والتحوّلات الاجتماعية في ليبيا"، **تبيّن**، المجلد 1، العدد 1 (2012)، ص 176.

[49] مصطفى عمر التير، **الثورة الليبية مساهمة في تحليل جذور الصراع وتداعياته** (بيروت: المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات، 2020)، ص 36.

Even Separatist tendencies in Libya—often conflated with demands for decentralized governance—were largely confined to the short-lived Cyrenaica Political Bureau, led by warlord Ibrahim Jadhran, and a few marginal movements in southern Libya. However, such movements failed to gain significant popular support. Although Jadhran's militias controlled key eastern oil fields for nearly three years, separatist claims remained politically and socially weak. [50] Analyzing such conflicts solely through ethnic or regional identities, without accounting for the actors' political economy, risks overlooking their underlying drivers. Libya's case is more accurately understood as a form of warlordism, in which strongmen control territory through force and challenge central authority. [51] Their de facto rule is sustained by a war economy that not only funds their operations but also serves as a source of political legitimacy.

4. conclusion

In conclusion, the Libyan case underscores the limitations of structuralist approaches—particularly those rooted in modernization theory—in explaining the dynamics of democratic transitions in fragmented or post-conflict states. While Libya pre-2011 exhibited many of the objective indicators commonly associated with successful transtion—such as high GDP per capita, urbanization, literacy, and ethnic homogeneity—these factors proved insufficient to ensure a democratic outcome. Instead, Libya's trajectory after 2011 demonstrates that structural preconditions alone do not dictate political futures. The legacy of Gaddafi's personalist regime, the absence of institutional continuity, and the collapse of central authority created a vacuum that was quickly filled by competing armed groups, local powerbrokers, and shifting alliances driven by interests rather than identity. The re-politicization of tribal affiliations, the rise of warlordism, and the entrenchment of a war economy illustrate how actors can adapt identities and affiliations to navigate volatile contexts. Moreover, claims that Libya was a stateless society prior to 2011 obscure the complexity of its historical development and the social gains achieved under the Jamahiriya system—however authoritarian it may have been. The role of tribes, often overstated in post-2011 analyses, was largely instrumentalized by the ruling powers and remains insufficient for understanding the deeper drivers of conflict and governance breakdown. Ultimately, democratization in Libya—and elsewhere—cannot be reduced to structural prerequisites or cultural determinism alone. Rather, it requires a more nuanced understanding that integrates structure with agency, historical specificity, and the evolving strategies of domestic actors. Only through this multifaceted lens can we begin to grasp why democratization succeeds in some contexts and fails in others, and how state collapse, civil war, and authoritarian resurgence can emerge even under seemingly favorable structural conditions.

[50] Irene Costantini, " Conflict dynamics in post-2011 Libya: a political economy perspective", *Conflict, Security & Development* 16, no. 5 (August 2016), 405-422.
[51] Philippe Le Billon, " The political ecology of war: natural resources and armed conflicts", *Political Geography* 20, no. 5 (2001), p.575.

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