Falling dictators
decide to withdraw their savings.
large number of their depositors suddenly
from the one behind bankruptcies of many
The intuition behind this is not too distant
years. Why have they been unable to
opposition, and they obviously had been
security forces to repress any
– they fear that a politically engaged mili-
inside story about the role of militaries in
these events. But one clue about why mili-
taries sometimes fail to intervene on behalf
of a dictatorship is in their role, or lack of
them to maintain enough repressive person-
to protect or put down these uprisings?

The ousted Tunisian president Ben Ali, like
his predecessor Habib Bourguiba, relied for repression on internal security forces
rather than the military. But when mass
protests erupted in December 2010, the
crime and internal security services were
overwhelmed. And the army – seeing the
magnitude of the protests and lacking a
vested interest in the regime’s survival –
refused to intervene.

In Syria, by contrast, the military has
been closely incorporated into the regime’s
government, the ruling Baath party, and
the repressive apparatus. After all, the cur-
rent president Bashar Assad’s father came
to power in 1970 in precisely the kind of
military coup that the Tunisian leader-
ship feared. To ensure its loyalty, the Syr-
ian officer corps is recruited on sectarian
grounds, from a minority Shia sect. Thus
the Syrian military knows that if the regime
fails, they will fall with it. They therefore
have an incentive to fight tooth and nail for
the regime’s survival.

You note that these have not been
representative dictatorships, so we
should be cautious about what lessons we
learn from this year’s events. How
so?
The authoritarian regimes in North Af-
rica and the Middle East have been some
of the most entrenched and repressive au-
toritarian regimes of our times. Many rely
on oil for their survival, many are mon-
archies and many have been governed by
long-serving, aging leaders. It is in part the
notoriousness of their leaders that makes
them unrepresentative: The average dicta-
tor is not a household name because he
stays in power for only a few years and is
most often replaced not in a popular upris-
ning but by another member of the elite in a
coup.

Thus when we generalize from the Arab
Spring to other authoritarian regimes –
China, Russia or Iran – we need to care-
fully distinguish between the unique and
the representative features of many North
African and Middle Eastern dictatorships.
All of these autocrats have maintained
their power in different ways. But are
there common aspects to their rule
that make any hoped-for transition to
democracy more difficult?

A striking feature of these uprisings is the
lack of an existing opposition or charis-
matic revolutionary leaders. These
have been truly popular revolu-
tions, which adds legitimacy to their aspira-
tions. But it may also prove a weakness
on the path to democracy. As a result of
decades of severe oppression, the opposi-
tion forces in almost every transforming
country in the region lack recognized lead-
ership, partisan organization and coherent
political ideology.

In fact, the only organized political
force in most countries in this region are
conservative, Islamist groups. Meanwhile,
the emergent transitional governments in
Egypt, Tunisia and Libya are being formed
under the tutelage of defectors, formerly
authoritarian elites or militaries. The popu-
lations in these countries may quickly grow
dissatisfied with democracy if the first
truly competitive elections bring to power
religious extremists or former authoritarian
elites.

Rising dictatorships

A Minute With ...™ TM is provided by the
UI News Bureau. To view archived int-
erviews, go to illinois.edu/goto/
aminutewith.