The Maghreb on the Eve of the Arab Uprising

Emma Murphy

Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring

by Michael J. Willis

The first brief chapter sets the historical and sociological context. The uniqueness of each colonial experience leaves an imprint on both collective regional identities and localised structures of both rulers and opposition. The second chapter leads us into the era of independent nation-states, with a set of countries united by nationalist rhetoric but unable to share a collective vision of what statehood should now mean, either among themselves or with their own citizens. Lacking a collective colonial enemy to bind them together, nationalist elites fragmented under the weight of ideological division and personal rivalries. Those with control over coercive forces centralised their hold on power, building increasingly authoritarian political bureaucracies. This was manifested in both republican and monarchical formats, and was more a blunt struggle for power than an ideological contest. All three countries witnessed the assertion of the primacy of political life – and on theories of ideological contest. All three countries were structured and managed through a blunt struggle for power than an ideological contest. All three countries witnessed the assertion of the primacy of political life – and on theories of ideological contest. All three countries were structured and managed through 

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Moroccan conservatism – ultimately made little difference to the authoritarian outcome of politics and all three remained unprepared for the challenges which were to come. 

Chapters three, four and five move from the narrative to the thematic, focusing on the discussion on key agents in the political process. When it comes to the military, it is not surprising that Morocco gets greater attention than Tunisia, and Algeria more than either of them. Whilst coercive power, and a willingness to wield it, has been common to all three regimes, at least prior to the Arab uprisings, the proliferation of security agencies and the transfer of elite reliance from the military to internal security and intelligence agencies had been of differing degrees. All three regimes have extended their militaries into the global War on Terror, although largely as a means of re-packaging their own internal war on political Islam and silencing the more vigorous forms of domestic opposition. In Algeria most of all, an entire decade was lost to the army’s war against militant Islam following the annulment of the outcome of the elections in 1992. A military coup d’état in 1999 – first Boudiaf, then Kafia, Zéroual and finally Bouteflika – to the presidency and, despite the latter’s growing personal authority over national politics, they remain les pouvoirs behind the scene.

But the Arab uprisings were not met in any of these countries by outright military engagement. Indeed, Tunisia’s Ben Ali arguably knew the battle was lost precisely because his Chief of Staff refused to send his troops against protesters. Moreover, and unlike the military in Algeria or Egypt, the Tunisian army has only marginal direct economic interests and has not played a cronyistic role in the economic reform processes of the last three decades. Thus we see that, despite its formal or less formal prominence in the political histories of individual countries or their leaders, overly simplistic assertions of common military junta-like rule in the Arab Maghreb hold little analytical water, Muammer Gheddafi notwithstanding.

The two chapters on political parties and Islamist movements are essential, even if curiously outdated. Essential because political parties – either supremely dominant or painfully neutered – have been the primary institutional vehicles for politics since independence. Equally, Islamist movements have been the bêtes noires for Maghrebi regimes, to be either tamed or eradicated if the latter are to survive. But outdated in so far as the Arab uprisings were led and sustained not by parties or even Islamist groups but by civil society organisations and mass spontaneous participation. Both political parties and Islamist groups were, if not absent, then lost in the crowd in the early days of revolutionary agitation in Tunisia, and their credibility as vehicles for popular opposition and genuine substantive regime change in Algeria is today marginal. In Morocco, and not least as a result of the rapid manoeuvrings of the Monarchs in response to uprisings elsewhere, constitutional reforms and somewhat more minimally parliamentary politics mean that neither parties nor Islamists are redundant, but one does wonder whether, should Willis write an updated version of this book in ten years time, the thematic section will be structured similarly around these two actors. Civil society and associational life, which merit only a couple of pages, have in the end proved more resilient, creative and engaged than they were previously credited for, although not without their own democratic deficiencies. Moreover, they have clearly developed through informal networks and new communications formats which made their nascent insurgency invisible to scholarly eyes, in the latter being predisposed to focus on formal politics and the ever-present state. Only with the uprisings in 2011 and beyond have scholars fully recognised the processes of change from below which have been re-booting Maghrebi political society and which might warrant a different emphasis from that devised by Willis in the structuring of future comparative political histories. That is not to say, however, that political parties are not resurging as major actors in the processes of transition or indeed that his own conclusions are ever anything other than spot on. A chapter on the Berber Question, for example, provides us with important reminder that politically, that democratically oriented discourses over identity and the state have been crumbling for decades, challenging exclusive state structures and sustaining a momentum of protest and opposition even in the darkest days of authoritarian rule.

The chapter on politics and economics sets out a story familiar to the developing world of post-independence etatism, unsustainable growth, international debt and ultimately economic liberalisation. The authoritarian political structures, whilst helpful in pushing through unpopular reforms in recent decades, subverted the intentions of international lenders by presenting political elites with apparently irresistible opportunities for rent-seeking and cronyism. Corruption abounded as informal economic behaviours trickled down through the middle classes, even as a widening poor underclass sought new means of survival. Growth stalled whilst the demands on economies accelerated. Nowhere were the contradictions between public policy and lived reality greater than in Tunisia, where just two families (those of the President and his wife), accumulated and exported vast amounts of the national wealth through their personal connections to key agents in the processes of privatisation, deregulation and trade liberalisation.

So was it inevitable that Tunisia should be the stage for the first Arab popular uprising? The brevity of the discussion here means that key aspects are glossed over or ignored: the food price spikes in 2007/8 and 2010 which erupted middle class living standards, the rapidly rising levels of personal debt which followed the introduction of new financial products, the collapse of phosphate export income which had sustained parts of the Tunisian interior. Relations with the international financial institutions and with the European Union also receive only passing mention, which does injustice to their importance in national economic discourses and indeed in the economies themselves. But the conclusion is fair: using liberal economic reforms simply as an opportune regime survival strategy led elites to perform them in ways which ultimately not only undermined their efficacy, but have actually created more urgent and threatening political challenges.

The final two chapters consider the three countries’ regional and international relations. The dysfunctionality of domestic political structures has been reflected in the litany of failed attempts to fashion a meaningful regional organisation. nowhere has this been more true than in the ongoing saga of the Moroccan and Algerian dispute over the Western Sahara. If King Hassan seized on Morocco’s own claim to sovereignty as a means of bolstering his own political legitimacy during the unstable years of the early 1970s, Algeria’s Boumedienne supported the population’s right to self-determination at least in part to undermine his own regime’s role in securing national independence. Playing ‘politics in the sand’ allowed both leaders to promote their own roles as leaders of key regional states, enabling them to recruit weaker neighbouring states to their causes and in doing so demonstrate their own greater relevance. But this did little to foster the kind of regional relationships which could promote the collective economic or diplomatic good or rescue them from the continuing European carve-up into spheres of influence.

Willis’s concluding chapter encapsulates the underlying tension in this book. Originally setting out to explore the seemingly extraordinary resilience of the authoritarian regimes, the tussle over the past, the trajectory out of North Africa largely swapped through its devastation but never at the outcome of politics and all three remained unprepared for the challenges which were to come. March/Mars 2014

Gender, Politics and Sustainable Land Utilisation: A Comparative Study of Pre-Fast Track and Fast Track Resettlement Programmes in Zimbabwe

By Onias Mata, Enna Sukutai Godlhanga, John Mpho, Ephraim HUDZIKINA Mavida Mazive and Norman Manyeruke

The agrarian reform dynamics in Southern Africa have to be understood within the framework of colonial land policies and legislation that were designed essentially to expropriate land and natural resource property rights from the indigenous people in favour of the white settlers. Faced with a skewed distribution of colonial settlement land ownership in the 1970s, the majority of Zimbabweans were faced with the daunting task of redistributing land equitably as a way of correcting the colonial injustices in land tenure and use. This comparative study on Zimbabwe's agrarian reform may provide countries such as South Africa and Namibia with valuable lessons, as these countries attempt to implement sustainable agrarian reforms.

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