

One of the interesting side effects of the uprisings across the Arab region, or more specifically of the locations and sequencing of those uprisings, has been the increased visibility of the Maghreb on the academic radar. Study of the North African countries – in the English language at least – had previously been the preserve of a relatively small contingent of scholars. This was due not least to the problem of language. To study diplomatic or political history, to engage with public sector organisations and political élites and to examine economic reports and civil society documents, having close familiarity with the French language was a must. Moreover, one aspect of the colonial legacy was the deposition of significant pertinent archives in France and a certain degree of French jealousy over its intellectual sphere of influence – mirror image of British academia’s own claims over the study of the Mashreq and the Persian Gulf. The colonial carve up of territory had become a post-colonial partition of research interest.

To some extent, the American academic community managed to fill the gap. The American Institute for Maghrib Studies (AIMS) had established research centres in each country which provided visiting researchers with access to sources, archives and institutional connections, not unlike the British Academy-sponsored institutes in the eastern Mediterranean countries. But as Michael Willis explains in the introduction to this timely volume, the resulting scholarship – excellent as it often was – tended towards in-depth studies of individual countries. He is entirely right to argue that there has historically been little by way of systematic comparative study across the Maghreb countries, in terms either of political history or of political science. One notable exception (and interestingly absent from Willis’ admittedly select bibliography) was Clement Henry Moore’s *Politics in North Africa: Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia*, published in 1970. Much as Willis does, Moore began with an examination of

pre-colonial society, and then moved on to examine how the ‘colonial dialectic’ drove the format of post-colonial political development. Moore focused his study on the processes of political modernisation and institutionalisation, with a theoretical approach that was very much of its time and which, in retrospect, presented a rather rosy view of Tunisia’s Bourguibist state as a success story. If it offered a credible first stab at a comparative study of the region, it was perhaps too much of an imposition of abstracted theories based on Western models to reflect the complexities and nuances of historically-grounded trajectories. More recent examples, such as Karim Mezran’s *Negotiating National Identity: The Case of the Arab States of North Africa* (Rome, Antonio Pellicani Editore, 2002) or Lise Storm’s *Prospects for Democracy in North Africa: Parties and Party System Institutionalization in the Maghreb* (Boulder, Colorado, Lynne Rienner, 2013) have updated the comparative effort, albeit with a focus on specific and narrow dimensions of political life – and on theories of nationalism and political parties rather than systems as a whole. Such was the setting for Michael Willis’ volume, which offers a more rounded and inclusive story.

His claims for the book are even so quite modest. He presents it as ‘a fairly comprehensive picture of political

dynamics’, as ‘a broad comparative text’ which will set out the region’s politics and modern history through consideration of political actors, themes and issues within a largely narrative and chronological approach. It is, he argues, ‘effectively an introductory text for the study of the Maghreb, and therefore existing scholars are unlikely to find much that is novel or unknown to them in it’ (p. 3). There is, he says, no substantive attempt to engage in theoretical discussions or to compare the Maghreb with other regions. This is simply a political history which privileges consideration of key themes of commonality and divergence between three Maghrebi countries – Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.

The exclusion of Libya and Mauritania is justified by the sheer scale of the job at hand (p. 5). Whilst there is a logic here in terms of the practicalities of structuring the volume, it can represent an uncomfortable omission. Can we really understand the development of Bourguiba’s African strategies, his machinations of Polisario’s struggle with Morocco, or the failures of efforts at regional Maghrebi unity, if a major player such as Libya is to be considered only in passing? One cannot but help feel that, by addressing the really interesting questions regarding the determinants of the very substantive differences between the geographically peripheral

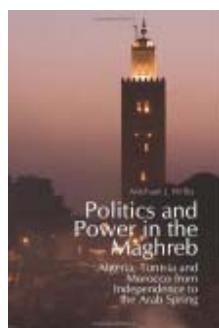
## The Maghreb on the Eve of the Arab Uprising

Emma Murphy

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

by Michael J. Willis

Hurst and Company, 2012, 410pp, £29.99, ISBN 978-1-84904-200-0



Maghreb countries and their more regionally important neighbours, the volume might have had still more instructive things to say about comparative study. But we must be fair to Willis. He readily acknowledges the limits of his project and actually does himself a disservice by suggesting that specialist scholars can learn nothing from his book. The focus on three countries allows detailed treatment and gives coherence to the narrative, thereby making the work both a convincing piece of scholarship and informative reading.

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 an individual, although Tunisia’s Bouguiba relied on charismatic and party-based legitimacy, the Moroccan monarch on religious status and constitutional supremacy, and Algeria’s Boumediene on a collegial leadership model which privileged the army. Thereafter, the national political systems were structured and managed through the rotation of elites, actual or effective single party rule, popular exclusion from the political realm, and a token nod to parliamentary models. The irony, as Willis points out, is that their varying supposed national missions – Tunisian modernisation, Algerian socialism and

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 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* brought the army's men – 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 a more or less prominent role 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, Muammar Ghaddafi 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 Monarch in response to uprisings elsewhere, constitutional reforms and somewhat more lively 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 them largely invisible to scholarly eyes, 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 resurfacing 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 reminders that democratically oriented discourses over identity and the state have been rumbling for decades, challenging exclusivist 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 *étatisme*, 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 squeezed 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.

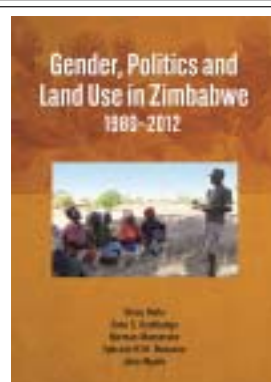
So was it inevitable that Tunisia should be the stage for the first Arab popular uprising? The brevity of the discussion here means that key aspects are glossed over or ignored: the food price spikes in 2007/8 and 2010 which eroded middle class living standards, the rapidly rising levels of personal 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 élites 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 create 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 claim to sovereignty as a means of bolstering his own political legitimacy during the unstable years of the early 1970s, Algeria's Boumediene supported the population's right to self-determination at least in part to underline 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 tsunami of popular protest that hit North Africa half way through his endeavour changed the game plan. If Tunisia's regime was the only one of the three to actually fall before the force of the wave, the regimes in Algeria and Morocco have had to perform some hasty footwork to avoid similar calamity, demonstrating their own vulnerabilities in the process. All the assumed continuities are now in question and the established political narratives of individual states – upon which this volume heavily draws – are proving inadequate to fully explain exactly why what happened did so at the time and in the manner in which it did. This was never meant to be a project based on fieldwork and original data. But relying so heavily as it does on the very broad swathe of the available literature, it inevitably falls foul of their omissions and explanatory inadequacies. Yet still, when one reads this volume, one is struck by the continuing relevance of such a comparative history. Willis's language is fluent and accessible. He tells a good story, striking a pleasing balance between detail and overarching narrative, pulling out the threads of themes and theories as he goes. He opens the door to new chapters of that story which are unfolding before us, but never pretends to be able to explain them more fully than his own informants did.

In sum, Willis achieves the goal he set for himself. This is a solid, worthwhile, introduction to the politics of the three Maghrebi countries which should find a place on every Maghreb scholar's bookshelves as a point of first reference. If events have overtaken it, and scholars find new questions more intriguing than established answers, that does not detract from the importance of this contribution as a stepping stone for the further development of comparative regional studies.



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

By Onias Mafa, Enna Sukutai Gudhlanga, John Mpofo, Ephraim Hudson Mazvidza Matavire 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 and ownership of land in favour of former colonial settlers, the new independent states are 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 reforms 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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