



## Tunisie: une démocratisation au-dessus de tout soupçon?

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Tunisie: une démocratisation au-dessus de tout soupçon?**, edited by Vincent Geisser and Amin Allal, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2018, 472 pp., €26 (softcover), ISBN 978-2-271-11807-3

The subtitle of this collection of twenty-three papers conveys suspicions about Tunisia's transition to democracy, but none of the twenty-seven authors argues that the *ancien régime* has been somehow restored. Many Tunisians are discontented but the democratic character of the regime, fragile as it may be, persists. Since the Revolution of 14 January 2011 two free and fair parliamentary elections have been held and with the country witnessing a shift in government from a coalition dominated by the Islamist Ennahda Movement to one in which the latter serves as a much weakened minority partner. Tunisia has effected a remarkable transition to democracy by most textbook definitions. The editors, however, may wish to echo the subtitle of a collection of papers that their mentor, Michel Camau, edited three decades earlier about Tunisian 'modernity' (Camau 1987), a concept enshrouded in far greater ambiguity than procedural democracy.<sup>1</sup> Their sequel also reaches deeply beneath the legalities of transition into Tunisia's political culture and social dynamics, which indeed contain a variety of clashing tendencies.

The editors efficiently organise this diverse set of papers into three parts that examine various changes associated with the transition: 1) the evolution of parties, trade unions, and other NGOs; 2) the administrative infrastructures of courts, information and security establishments, mosques, and municipalities; and 3) evolving conceptions of citizenship and minorities. The plunge into details comes at a certain cost, however. In supposedly deconstructing the myth of the Tunisian exception (22) – as the only Arab country to break free of dictatorship – the regional significance of the 14 January Revolution gets lost. Only one paper, by Nicolas Dot-Pouillard, discusses the interactions between Tunisian and other Arab political actors. He notes the consonances between the Tunisian Ennahda and Muslim Brotherhood, and between Tunisian leftists and the Hezbollah-Iran axis, as well as their respective cross-border clashes. He also observes that Rached Ghannouchi (wisely) keeps up a relationship with Iran over the objections of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (150), but he omits any discussion of alleged UAE efforts to destabilise Tunisia.<sup>2</sup> No paper addresses possible spillover into Tunisia of the competition between Qatar and other GCC countries in Libya, whether to destroy the revolution or simply to offset Qatar's support of Ennahda. The approach of this book tends to lose the revolutionary forest for the trees, and there is little about political economy or potential social revolution. But dissecting Tunisia's various political and sociological dimensions makes it more comparable with other Arab states and may shed light on prospects for further reform in the region.

In this respect, the paper by Michaël Ayari and Thierry Brésillon on the evolution of the Ennahda Movement is of special interest, as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt

and elsewhere may eventually follow its lead. Power exposed its 'programmatic sterility' (94), helping to explain why Ennahda, weakened in the 2014 elections, was so ready to stay on as a junior partner in the new government. In 2016, Ghanouchi argued that political Islam was no longer justified in Tunisia; in the new division of labour the party was to focus on politics, leaving religion to other elements of civil society. He stopped what Eric Gobe calls an 'impossible political purge' by preventing passage of a law (defeated by one vote) that would have excluded all leaders from politics who had served in the Ben Ali regime. Jérôme Hertaux's careful analysis of the 'recycling' of 'disqualified' elites lays to rest any idea, however, of a return of the *ancien régime*. Individual members of the discredited Destour resurfaced in fragmented parties contesting the October 2011 elections, and Béji Caïd Essebsi assembled many more in his Nidaa Tounes, founded in 2012. But those who did the recycling were choosy, selecting only the 'recyclables', a context-dependent variable (181–182). There was no wholesale resurrection of the Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD).

Choukri Hmed notes how the parties of the extreme left, far from transforming a political revolution into a social one, lost momentum after 2011. The most important of them joined the Nidaa Tounes in 2012, demobilising many of their new recruits while providing useful cover for the return of Destour leaders. Elections may also have contributed to the waning of political enthusiasm among the youth. Deborah Perez did extensive field work in Kasserine and Tunis, to show how the legislative elections of 2011 and 2014 rekindled and reshaped the RCD's old patron-client relationships, some of them falling into the hands of Ennahda, which sought government jobs for its former political prisoners. Without state resources, deputies were at a loss in seeking reelection in 2014. One Ennahda deputy from Thala lost hope despite having raised gifts for some constituents of sewing machines from the Kuwait embassy! Kasserine was in fact the only governorate won by Moncef Marzouki in the presidential elections of 2014, in which Caïd Essebsi's Nidaa Tounes had defeated Ennahda in the legislative elections held a few weeks earlier (maps 120, 121).

Ennahda did, however, play into the hands of Tunisian landowners. Alia Gana's fascinating study shows how the Islamist party simply replaced RCD control over the Union Tunisienne de l'Agriculture et de la Pêche (UTAP), and defended its clients against peasant demands for land redistribution. Only one new producer cooperative survived, in the oasis of Jemna in the far south, between Douz and Kebili.

Hela Yousfi, an organisational theorist who has written extensively on the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT), suggests that its pyramidal structure that delicately navigated between autonomy and submission to the party-state will need to adapt to a changing field of political competition and union pluralism. Women, too, featured a variety of feminisms, Islamic as well as secular, in a proliferation of new associations. Sana Ben Achour, a founder of the highly respected Femmes Démocrates, also shows how women could unite over providing day care to the deputies, as well as standing for various forms of equality, that of inheritance – mentioned only in passing (48) – being the major issue that will resonate regionally across the Muslim world.

As for the book's second major theme, that of administrative infrastructures, several papers point to greater continuity than change from past practice. As Eric Gobe observes, only seven judges were disqualified and transitional justice was stalled. Yasmine Bouagga did extensive research into Tunisia's overcrowded prisons, partly a consequence of strict legislation against cannabis – accounting for almost one-third of the inmates (207) – as well as lack of funding for more modern prisons. Despite massive presidential pardoning to mitigate overcrowding, there were still 23,553 in 2016 after an amnesty of 14,092, compared to 31,000 before the revolution. Despite little progress, human rights groups soldiered on to a subject that was no longer taboo. Police organised themselves into unions to protect themselves from popular revenge, and Khanza Ben Tarjem raises the disturbing question of a possible parallel between the Tunisian police's 'founding violence' against Salah Ben Youssef in 1956 and the revolution of 2011. Her paper is an excellent summary of the earlier history.

Audrey Pluta discusses a possible politicisation of the Tunisian military but unfortunately did not have access to recently published books by Aziz Krichen (2018) and Nouredine Jebnoun (2017), the latter of which analyses impediments to the reform of military intelligence. She relies principally upon interviews with former President Marzouki's chief of staff, an informant whom Krichen accuses of planting fake news about an attempted coup, so as to demonstrate the president's brave defense of the Ennahda government. Krichen served at the time in the presidency as *ministre conseiller* – a political adviser with ministerial rank.

Enrique Klaus documents the fate of Tunisia's official press agency, Tunisie Agence Presse (TAP), liberated from Ben Ali's controls but with limited professional capabilities in the service of political patrons and hence unable to compete with more competitive information sources. Mosques, too, suffered from a lack of professionalism. Anna Grasso points to an 'empty shell' of a Ministry of Religious Affairs unable to properly train local imams (263). Though they no longer had to follow weekly directives of the Ministry of Interior, only 5% were qualified, which was hardly an effective barrier to self-proclaimed Salafists. Like the police, the imams also unionised to protect their interests, founding not one but three unions, reflecting Islamist, Salafist, and modernist 'Bourguibian' tendencies (272–273).

The decentralisation heralded by reformers did not seem to gain much momentum despite endless drafts of the Code of Local Collectivities. Souhail Belhadj appropriately titles her essay 'une décentralisation au-dessus de tout soupçon' and notes that Tunisia spends only 3% of the state budget on its municipalities, compared to 11% in Morocco, where decentralisation has long enjoyed a higher priority.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, in the third part of the book, new identities and conceptions of citizenship and human rights are explored. The 'moral electricity' (30) associated with the revolution surged with aspiring rights by blacks (discussed by Maha Abdelhamid), various gender minorities (Ludovic-Mohammed Zahed), the right to work for women as well as men (Sarah Barrieres and Abir Krefa, focusing on Kasserine and Sbeitla), and the right of mobility, articulated more by NGOs than the *haraga* trying to exercise it by burning their identification papers and taking risky passages across the Mediterranean (Farida Souiah). Jean-Pierre Cassarino

notes, however, that security may trump human rights as Tunisia backslides into *ancien régime* practices, after a brief revolutionary interlude, of facilitating the European Union's return of unwelcome Tunisian refugees. In France, meanwhile, the Tunisian revolution unravelled the extraordinary controls, documented by Mathilde Zerman, over its diaspora while promoting healthier binational citizenship, a subject further discussed by Vincent Geisser and Wajdi Limam. French is no longer the special mark of a bilingual elite in retreat, as the return of binationals gives the language a more popular flavour, as noted by Stephanie Pouessel, who focuses on the ever more frequent public use of Tunisian dialect to engage the populace.

In conclusion, most of these papers disseminate creative social science research and spell out their various sources, such as social media and surveys, in box inserts. The volume meets the rigorous standards of France's Conseil National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and offers essential background for most research on contemporary Tunisia. It has a useful chronology (2008–2018), though unfortunately no index.

## Notes

1. To be sure, substantive democracy is as richly ambiguous as modernity, but Tunisia has so far engaged in a purely political revolution, not a social one.
2. See Rori Donaghy and Linah Alsaafin, "UAE threatens to destabilize Tunisia for not acting in Abu Dhabi's interests," *Middle East Eye*, 30 November 2015. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uae-threaten-destabilise-tunisia-not-acting-abu-dhabis-interests-1261316730>.
3. Writing in the 1960s, Douglas E. Ashford (1967) noted significantly greater commitment to building up municipalities in Morocco than in Tunisia.

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