

Revolution and Authoritarianism in North Africa, by Frédéric Volpi. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 232 pages.

Reviewed by Clement M. Henry

This book is advertised as offering a new approach to understanding the political causality behind the 2011 uprisings in North Africa. The author wishes to present them from the inside, so to speak, "to retain the implications of meaning-making in the construction of the causality," (p. 4) rather than presenting them from the outside, identifying "factors that constrain (or facilitate) human action in a regular fashion" (p. 2) in the manner of a natural scientist. He rules out any "structural" explanation for differing outcomes of the Arab Spring, using Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud and Andrew Reynolds (*The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform*), whose per capita income explanation is indeed highly reductionist, as his convenient straw men.

Volpi assumes that Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia share a common starting point of "one known institutional model--in this case more or less open authoritarian regimes..." (p. 172)--having a relatively stable routine of governance. He adequately describes the evolution of each regime from independence until 2011 in a full chapter subtitled "Structuring the option for change" but nowhere does he systematically compare their vulnerabilities much less explain why, at least in retrospect, it was Tunisia rather than one of the others that triggered the Arab Spring. Nor does he point out any connection between Hassan's opening to the opposition in 1998 and his son's tactics of 2011, opening the Moroccan government to another tamed opposition. Each regime supposedly had rational-legal legitimacy based on elections (and "pseudo-politics" in Morocco and Algeria), although Gaddafi's "neo-sultanistic approach...ensured a low level of political institutionalization" (p. 68) in Libya. All four countries also developed patronage networks, based on oil revenues in Algeria and Libya, and on business networks in Morocco and Tunisia. The one significant difference, helping in subsequent chapters to explain the more flexible Moroccan and Algerian responses to extensive popular mobilization and unrest, was their multi-party politics, compared to Tunisia's more rigid dominant single party and Libya's virtually nonexistent party system. Completely overlooked was the Tunisian coalition of opposition

parties, including the Islamist Nahda as well as secular parties, formed long before 2011, that helped to consolidate the 14 January Revolution.

From a supposed common starting point and excluding any "structural" explanations lest they obscure revolutionary creativity, the countries entered phase 2 of "impossible uprisings" and new arenas of contentious politics, a process of "deinstitutionalization" of the regime and the emergence of new practices by protesters and incumbents. Volpi reasonably argues that conflagrations were unpredictable and initially imperceptible; he observes that it took several days (Dec. 17-28, not weeks, p. 73) before Bouazizi's self-immolation acquired revolutionary momentum in Tunisia. But he did not really get inside the movement to observe who disseminated the news of the attempted suicide, much less how it was misrepresented as the plight of unemployed graduates. Nor did he understand how far the practices of Ben Ali and his wife Leila Trabelsi had deviated from Bourguiba's republican norms, much less compare their deviations to lesser ones of their companion authoritarians. While Volpi shows some familiarity with the political economy literature, he made no effort to compare the relative density of Tunisia's private sector and civil society with those of other three countries. He does, however, usefully compare the ineffective responses of Ben Ali and Gaddafi to those of the Moroccan and Algerian regimes. He might have probed further, however, to get at the sources of the "pseudo-politics" that protected the latter two --a Moroccan makhzen well versed in the arts of manipulating civil society and an equally experienced Algerian DRS, successor to the Sécurité Militaire.

He also missed the inside story of Tunisia's amazing creation of transitional institutions. He correctly notes that transitional Prime Minister Caïd Essebsi facilitated the inclusion and institutionalization of the "opposition-led National Council for the Protection of the Revolution" but missed the ins and outs of what was actually going on. Quite fortuitously, following Tunisia's constitutional script, Fouad Mebazaa, president of Tunisia's rubber stamp National Assembly, replaced Ben Ali as interim president. It was he who without consulting anyone else (as he later explained to me) called upon Essebsi to become prime minister eleven tumultuous days after Ben Ali had departed. Essebsi was

Mebazaa's political patron who as interior minister in 1967 had given his fellow Tunisois his first political post as police chief. And the leader of the National Council was Yahd Ben Achour, a former law school dean who also came from a distinguished Tunisois family. Appointed to head a specialized commission to study the constitution, he expanded its brief in consultation with other elites to coopt up to 155 members virtually representing civil society.

Volpi's third and final phase of his causal sequence is the return to a new normal of institutional practices. His account of Libya is exceptionally sterile, about "the routinization of wartime behaviors" (p. 167). It is a pity that he was not exposed to Neil Ketchley's works on the dynamics of Egypt's uprising. Out of a misplaced respect for political agency Volpi has thrown out the baby of scientific insight with the bathwater of reductionist parsimony.

Clement M. Henry, Emeritus
The University of Texas at Austin