North Africa’s Desperate Regimes: A Review Essay


Reviewed by Clement M. Henry

“Regime change” seems less of a priority for the Maghrib than for America’s more favored stomping grounds in the Near East and Persian Gulf, but all three of the Western Mediterranean regimes that gained independence from France face mid-life crises as they turn 50 or try, in Algeria, to recover from an earlier suicide attempt. They are all desperately “performing” human rights for angry audiences at home as well as for overseas governments and investors, for whom they are also brushing up on the latest trends in “governance.” This collection of recent books about Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia conveys some of the popular rage against these desperate regimes as well as educated observations about them.

Susan Slyomovics, a distinguished anthropologist at MIT, weaves an “unusual discursive formation” (p. 3) from her interviews with Moroccan victims of torture and
documents their popular performances of human rights activities. She is less interested in the political gymnastics of states, but the title of her eloquent book has added punch in the context of this review: regimes, too, “perform” human rights, that is, they make a show of respecting them rather than actually enforcing the rule of law. That they have to pay some lip service to human rights, however, is already a measure of their desperation in the face of widespread outrage. The late King Hassan II, whose police services were reputed to be the busiest and cruellest of the Maghrib, created an Advisory Committee on Human Rights (ACHR) in 1990. His skeletons were already out of the closet as early as 1986, in the form of testimonials published in France (Abraham Serfaty, cited p. 224n35), and even in Morocco, before the censor stopped Abdelkader Chaoui’s book after it sold 1000 copies (p. 81). The king perhaps also anticipated that the end of the Cold War was diminishing Morocco’s strategic value and hence making his regime more vulnerable to international criticism.

As they express themselves, creating new public spaces for civil society, Slyomovics’ informants also document the limits of Morocco’s newfound concern for human rights. The ACHR took eight years to admit that Morocco, like Argentina or Chile in their unhappier days, had actually “disappeared” people and to name some 112 of them, an “absurdly low” number (p. 22), 56 of whom were declared dead without any further information and the remainder missing, abroad or perhaps also deceased. After Mohammed VI succeeded his father in 1999, the new king commanded the ACHR to implement plans for an independent Indemnity Commission to compensate the families of the “disappeared” ones and other victims of his father’s regime. As of January 2003 the Commission had received some 15,000 requests for indemnities, including 9,000 filed past the original Dec 31, 1999, deadline (see p. 191). To put these numbers in some comparative perspective, Algerian family associations are seeking information about their 6446 relatives who were “disappeared” during the 1990s (El Watan, June 2, 2005), and the real but undeclared number may be far higher. What is really at stake, however, is the rule of law and accountability. Neither Morocco nor Algeria seems ready to render their police accountable, and that is the principal grievance of many of Slyomovics’ informants and of Algerians, too, if newspaper reports are credible.

Slyomovics captures many of the poignant feelings of women who lost their children, husbands, and fathers, but only elliptically implies that it may be harder on a Muslim woman than on an Argentinian or Chilean to lose her husband in legal limbo. One of her informants complained that she could not get a passport or her son’s diploma, both requiring a husband’s signature, since she could not prove he was either dead or alive (p. 64). The larger question is whether Morocco’s two waves of repression, against the leftists in the 1960s and 1970s and against the Islamists in the 1980s, will end or whether America’s War on Terror, coupled with the Casablanca bombings of May 13, 2003, is inspiring a third wave.

Slyomovics devotes a full chapter, in addition to a general one on prison, to “Islamist Political Prisoners.” Among her older generation of the 1980s there were still anxious discussions about the propriety of engaging in hunger strikes, which could be viewed as a form of suicide and hence against the teachings of Islam. A compromise was to engage in rolling hunger strikes, prisoners taking turns of 24 or 48 hours. The new generation, framed by suicide bombings, has no such misgivings: the first of over a thousand Islamist hunger strikers died on May 10, 2005 (Middle East International, 27 May 2005, p. 20).
Slyomovics documents the continued US outsourcing of suspected terrorists to Morocco’s “newest specialized torture center” in Temara near Rabat.

Morocco evidently continues to enjoy a special competitive advantage in the War On Terror, in that “the international community recognizes Moroccan expertise in torture” (p. 194). How confident can we be that the Moroccan government’s grudging admissions of human rights violations will really translate into “Never This Again,” the title (without a question mark) of her final chapter and slogan of the Moroccan human rights movement? One answer is that the police apparatus is gobbling up ever more prisoners than they are releasing. More ominously, one of her informants, a human rights activist and former victim whom the new king coopted to head the Indemnity Commission, seems to have been corralled into the royal stables. “To the charge of allowing the perpetrators to go free, Benzekri advances an overarching perspective that acknowledges the stranglehold of Morocco’s pervasive culture of impunity” (p. 197). Circles of people finally articulating their past suffering may indeed be permeating civil society from the ground up, but the first and apparently, since this book does not cite more recent ones, the last anniversaries celebrating their martyrs were conducted in 1999, the first and best year of King Mohammed VI’s human rights “performances.”

Populating the civil society of newly if temporarily empowered victims and their families is another variant of the “new middle class” (NMC) that Manfred Halpern celebrated in 1963 (The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa, Princeton University Press). Shana Cohen is updating the travails of this class in Morocco, despite the fact that her book, originally a Berkeley PhD dissertation in sociology, gives no reference to Halpern’s classic work. Cohen’s “global middle class” (GMC) of Moroccans in a new post-national as well as post-colonial age deepens the mystery and ambiguities surrounding the original NMC but also testifies to the pervasive political alienation of a new generation of college-educated aspiring elites. The NMC had been an imaginary construct of shared consciousness of a national mission.

Cohen uncritically conveys this optimistic, Promethean aspect of Halpern’s MNC: “The modern middle class… saw itself as the vanguard of progress…. [and] represents a modern class because its members translate change, development, in terms of themselves...” (pp. 137, 141). But in fact the “vanguard” never materialized in Morocco because the makhzan preferred in 1965 to assassinate its prime leader and exemplar, Mehdi Ben Barka. Her GMC is the counterpoint to this mythical NMC: “Conversely, the young, urban, educated make up the global middle class because they share the same inability to equate collective representation and the external environment with steps of individual change” (p. 141). In other words, in place of the NMC’s shared (if usually frustrated) aspirations, the new, “global” middle class is united by a common inability to share a national purpose. In the dismal 1990s they just lapsed into “melancholy.” “In this moment of transition between the nation-state and globalization, melancholia – the loss of an ideal, a past object of identification, and the subsequent internalization of this loss – becomes the psychic unifier of a seemingly disparate group of people and the basis for social action” (p. 109). This seems quite a stretch, though one can observe a lot of nostalgia in the Maghrib for the early days of independence. This nostalgia seems more pervasive, however, among Algerian than Moroccan elites. Many Algerians regret the liquidation of Algerian industry at the hands of Boumediene’s successors after 1978,
whereas their Moroccan counterparts are more likely to remember classmates being tortured and thrown out of airplanes in the 1960s.

Postmodern sociology supplemented by quotes from Harvard’s Homi Bhabha is not particularly helpful for understanding Morocco, but Cohen’s informants have their stories that, added to those of Slyomovics, project a deep sense of alienation within Moroccan elites. Strangely, despite many visits and three years of living in Casablanca, Cohen has less to say about political Islam than Slyomovics, perhaps because her sample of 70 educated Moroccans happens to be disproportionately secular or uncaring. She remarks in passing that the women she interviewed who worked in the private sector service industries “often distinguished themselves and each other socially by smoking, drinking, going out at night, and wearing clothing brought from France or the United States…In contrast, women who are unemployed or who work in public administration often wear more conservative clothing and do not smoke or drink either because of social norms or religious practice” (p. 26). Her penultimate chapter is entitled “A Generation of Fuyards [escapists]” but may underestimate the capacities of a renovated Moroccan vanguard, replenished with new graduates recruited by the Islamists and other opposition parties in an emerging political culture of human rights that Slyomovics’ prisoners continue to articulate.

The very title of Lahcen Brouksy’s book is intended as a “cry of intellectual revolt” (p. 9), but Dr. Brouksy is also not only a political scientist and expert in rural development, with administrative as well as academic experience, but also a seasoned politician who, as the deputy from Oulmes, 1977-1983, served a parliamentary brain trust attached to Mahjoubi Ahardan’s Popular Movement. He is wily in the ways of feckless Moroccan pluralism and understands the power of the makhzan to manipulate, divide, and rule. He sees Morocco as a work in progress, “leaving behind an authoritarian century yet without fully entering the new liberal era” (p. 8) – stuck, in short, in some sort of transition that may be a never-ending process. He sees Moroccan democracy, promising once upon a time, as broken down (“en panne”) despite a solid history of responsible trade-unionism, industrious Fassi and Soussi bourgeoisies, and reasonably decent public administration. He does not present solutions or predictions but makes sharp and well informed observations about Morocco’s political landscape.

One important change is that the heart of the system, the makhzan, is now run by young technocrats who tend by their training to put economics ahead of politics. The wealthy are becoming ever more so, although the bourgeoisie in Brouksy’s views is not ready to meet the challenges of globalization. It supports a civil society of NGOs, but these in turn should be more deeply concerned with the growing poverty of the rural masses. Brouksy notes that no serious land reform was ever undertaken and consequently the rural exodus to the cities has accelerated despite efforts since the 1960s to keep these miserable people out of Morocco’s clean-cut colonial cities. The situation is so bad that 30,000 young Moroccans annually risk their lives to cross the Mediterranean illegally.

In parliament his brain trust of rustics from the Berber Popular Movement had surprised the makhzan in 1978 by promoting the same radical “middle class” ideas as their urban cousins in Mehdi Ben Barka’s party, all of them being college graduates who had once belonged to the Union Nationale des Etudiants Marocains (UNEM). A quarter of a century later Brousky articulates the same ideas but also sharply criticizes all of
Morocco’s political parties – some 37 of them, if 13 new ones get approved (p. 38) -- for being utterly out of touch with their society. He cites Mehdi Ben Barka, who had warned in 1963 that the politicians of the Left were already out of touch with their constituents. And Brousky notes that the same familiar faces, including Abdallah Ibrahim, who briefly served as prime minister in 1964, were resurfacing with their old quarrels that block any progress.

Brousky sounds alarm bells: “Terrorism engendered by radical political Islam has nested in our middle class, a disarticulated, pauperized, illiterate, uncultivated [one] of blocked horizons, left to go mad. This formless social swamp has been taken hostage” (p. 201). The solution is not more counter-terrorism legislation that further undermines justice but rather to face up to Morocco’s social problems. “The authorities, the mahkzan, the state are in need of a drastic overhaul in the face of social effervescence that rejects immobilism” (p. 202). The missing link, for Brousky as for any putative middle class vanguard, would be a representative yet efficient political party system.

If Morocco, despite a luxuriant political pluralism, suffers from a lack of political intermediation, the Algerian illness is more severe, although the regime survived a radical Islamic onslaught, perhaps exaggerated its violence to marginalize it politically, yet still reports enough attacks in peripheral regions to justify a continued state of emergency. Although more “progressive” than Morocco in the 1960s, it remains more reticent about its “disappeared” today, perhaps because extensive repression in Algeria, as in neighboring Tunisia to the east, is a more recent phenomenon. In short, Morocco is at the forefront of the formation of any new civil society, while the earlier nationalist generations of Algeria and Tunisia now lag in public recollections of their respective experiences of repression.

With the breakup of Algeria’s single-party system in 1988, over sixty new parties were formed but they are even less plausible than their Moroccan counterparts, some of which at least enjoy historical legitimacy. By contrast, Algeria’s historical National Liberation Front, as Mohammed Benchicou knows well, was never more than a battlefield for personal clienteles of the presidency and contending power centers in the army. But before reviewing his polemic against President Bouteflika, Algeria’s dismal political economy deserves attention.

Abdelkader Sid Ahmed, an economics professor based in Paris, is so discouraged that he turns to the Asian development state as a possible model for Algeria. Sid Ahmed used to advise Boumediene’s economic czar, Belaid Abdesselam, and he also consulted for President Mohammed Boudiaf, Algeria’s savior brought in by the generals in 1992 to govern the country but then assassinated after six months by one of their factions for becoming too popular, too legitimate, and too serious about cracking down on corruption. Professor Sid Ahmed understands Algeria to have lost twenty years of development, 1979-1999, resulting from the change of economic policy after Boumediene’s death. Others may argue that the policy of “industrializing industries” pursued by Belaid Abdesselam, Boumediene’s economic czar, in the 1970s was unsustainable. But Sid Ahmed is expressing nostalgia for the Boumediene era that is widely shared within Algeria’s educated middle class. Like so many other Algerians he laments the current contradiction between the country’s $30 billion of reserves [$45 billion by the end of 2004] and massive unemployment, deterioration of social services, disintegration of
public sector industry, and dispersion of ten of thousands of engineers and other technical formed at great expense by the Algerian state (p. 13).

In this reviewer’s opinion, however, the model of the Asian development state is really not relevant to Algeria or indeed to the rest of the Arab world, despite supposed sightings of Tigers on the Nile and in Tunisia. Algeria exaggerates the general tendency in its neighborhood of overpriced labor that is no longer competitive in international markets. The Asian development model depended on disciplined labor forces that, for better or worse, have no place in Algeria’s rentier economy. It is not just the oil but also the proximity to France that corrupts any competitive international pricing of labor. Beyond extensive French-style theorizing with lots of footnotes including a lot of Anglo-American literature, Sid Ahmed does not have any concrete suggestions of productive niches where Algeria might, apart from oil and gas, enjoy some comparative advantage. He does not do any strategic homework that might highlight, for instance, Algeria’s competitive edge in tourism (the Sahara) or, looking further ahead, retirement homes for North Europeans (maybe in joint ventures with Tunisians). His conclusion that European aid should give priority to “la formation des elites et l’émergence des classes moyennes” for the sake of technology transfer (p. 136) may affirm his own class interest but begs the transparency and legitimacy. It also contains a set of biographies questions of attracting foreign investment and bringing local talent back home.

Benchicou deserves mention in this review of desperate regimes not so much for the contents of his book as for the fact that he is in jail. He is the poster child of the Algerian press, serving two years for this polemic against President Bouteflika published in France on the eve of Algeria’s 2004 presidential elections. His publisher in Paris has also complained of a break-in (El Watan, 5 June 2005). Benchicou had been managing editor of Le Matin, a popular French-language daily, also now shut down, that recruited much of its staff from the defunct Marxist Alger Républicain. He enjoyed excellent contacts with the French Left and served much of Algeria’s Westernized elite with a claimed circulation of 140,000 in 1999 (and a good Internet search engine) – in other words a significant segment of Algeria’s new middle class.

His book is full of amusing vignettes displaying the smoke and mirrors of Algerian transparency and legitimacy. It also contains a set of biographies of leading Algerian personalities (pp. 225-238) that is useful for readers who do not have access to Acheur Cheurfi’s more extended reference work (La classe politique algérienne, Algiers: Casbah Editions, 2001). But it is difficult for this reviewer to take seriously Benchicou’s insistence, for instance, that the Americans got the Saudis to make the Emiratis give a key Algerian general the green light in 1998 for Bouteflika to be elected president in 1999 (p. 37).

Benchicou probably provoked the wrath of the regime by profiling Bouteflika as a “putchiste de carrière,” an accusation that may reflect the author’s resentment of the coup that deposed Ben Bella in 1965 and silenced Alger Républicain. Selective quotations by military officers opposed to Bouteflika may have also given offense. It is natural, however, that an elected president – however fair and free those elections really were in 1999 and 2004 – should try to subordinate the military to civilian, i.e. presidential rule. Might some general really have defeated him in a democratic election (p. 59)? Ironically Benchicou relied heavily for his information on unhappy generals, although some had interesting insights. For instance, the army chief of staff, before retiring after
Bouteflika’s reelection, declared that a state of emergency was no longer necessary (p. 44). To give one example of its uses, however, the Emergency permitted the regime to confine demonstrations against the American invasion of Iraq to one meeting organized in a closed hall by a Leftist fringe group. As if to sustain the need for emergency legislation, newspapers were still reporting “terrorist” attacks in peripheral places on almost a daily basis in June 2005.

Although he is less knowledgeable than Sid Ahmed about political economy, Benchicou is an economic nationalist who rejects efforts to modernize Algeria’s oil and gas industry. He views Bouteflika’s efforts to enact new legislation in 2001 as an apology and surrender to foreign interests sacrificed by the oil nationalizations of 1971 (p. 108). The new legislation, eventually passed after Bouteflika’s second electoral victory in 2004, was in fact designed to attract the leading transnationals, Exxon, Shell and BP, not necessarily the French, to risky exploration and development in uncharted territories with the latest technology.

The Algerian writers seem less open to real social and political change than Brouksy, perhaps because they have already experienced too much of it. Tunisians, too, like Moncef Marzouki, are more outspoken about human rights and the need for political change. The successor regime to Bourguiba may, in fact, be the most vulnerable of the three, because Tunisia deserves better governance than its neighbors, given its history. Kenneth Perkins presents an excellent history of modern Tunisia that avoids all polemics but needs to be supplemented by more critical analyses of the Ben Ali regime, like those of Siino and Marzouki. By the latter’s account Tunisia has taken Morocco’s place as North Africa’s premier human rights abuser.

Perkins has deftly navigated through tricky terrain to write a good, objective history that a tourist with intellectual curiosity may be able to carry into Tunisia without being stopped at the airport – or perhaps even purchase inside the country. Cambridge University Press advertises the book as a tourist guide because, alas, serious country studies about such quiet little places no longer sell well in the social sciences. In this spirit the book cleverly opens with an imaginary ride from La Marsa to Tunis on the light railway past Carthage and La Goulette, followed by a walk up the main Avenue Bourguiba to the medina, the Kasbah, and eventually another metro ride to the Bardo Palace, all in five pages observing the artifacts of almost three millennia of Tunisian history. The remainder of the book is a scholarly survey of its modern history, 1835-2003, with a critical bibliography for each of seven chronologically arranged chapters. The text is sprinkled with photos of downtown Tunis in the 1920s, Habib Bourguiba’s triumphal homecoming in 1955, and many others, as well as posters and postage stamps but also old maps that regrettably were only barely readable.

Perkins’s history has to be concise, given the space limitations, but he manages to bring to bear the rich new insights of Tunisian scholars who have been liberated from the Bourguibist monopoly that had tended to identify the individual with the life of the nationalist movement. He treads carefully and tries to be fair yet critical of both Bourguiba and his successor, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. For instance, “Bourguiba’s embrace of liberal values did not extend to the tolerance of contrary views” (p. 129), whether of Abd al-Aziz Tha’albi in 1937 or Salah Ben Youssef in 1955. Perkins also tactfully lets it remain “uncertain” how “meaningful and satisfying” political changes under Bourguiba’s successor, have been (p. 7).
Given these constraints, the author weaves an interesting story. His reminder seems timely that Tunisia’s short-lived Constitution of 1864, sometimes vaunted as the first for an Arab country, was imposed by the French and British consuls and had little indigenous support. He also observes that the French administrators in Tunisia looked to Algerian models “more often as examples of what not to do” (p. 40). Consequently various generations of educated Tunisian elites had greater opportunities to express themselves and mobilize support than did their Algerian counterparts. We are also informed of some the unexpected impacts of the two world wars. During the first one Tunisians were able to buy back substantial agricultural holdings relinquished by colons called to war, and Tunisian merchants temporarily regained markets from others. But 80,000 Tunisian Muslims were also drafted, 20,000 of them becoming casualties on the Western front, and some 5,000 dying in Morocco and Syria. With the end of wartime prosperity and return of demobilized colons as well as the ragged Tunisians, the stage was set for an enlarged and reinvigorated Tunisian nationalism. Again after World War II, the Free French, whom the Allies parachuted back into Tunisia, arrested some 4000 nationalists, setting the stage for yet another round of nation-building, but until his death in exile in 1948 Moncef bey, who had come to the throne during the war, stole the limelight from both Bourguiba and Ben Youssef. Tunisia perhaps escaped the fate of monarchy (Moroccan style?) because the struggle with France continued a few more years.

Only 82 pages, less than half the book, are devoted to the half century since independence, but the author manages to bring new elements to light, such as (citing an article published by Abdeljelil Temimi in 2000, p. 236) Bourguiba’s contacts since 1957 with the World Jewish Congress that prepared the way for his historic speech in 1965 advocating the recognition of Israel within its original boundaries passed by the UN General Assembly in 1947 (pp. 144-145). However, he also misses some important details. For instance, Salah Ben Youssef was assassinated in Frankfurt in 1961, not Cairo (p. 132), and his assailant, at least the one who organized the hit if he did not actually pull the trigger, was hardly “unknown” (p. 129). He was one of Bourguiba’s notorious enforcers, head of a party cell near Tunis in the early 1960s, and eventually deputy director of the ruling party. Perkins also omits former Interior Minister Tahar Belkhodja’s very important, balanced political memoir that covers the independence period until his retirement in 1983. And his explanation of the campaign to liberate the French naval base at Bizerta in 1961 may deserve a slightly different emphasis – less attention to Nasser’s Suez “triumph” and more to Algeria’s Mers el Kebir at that juncture. In this reviewer’s opinion, he does not sufficiently emphasize or adequately explain Bourguiba’s return to unchecked power in 1971-72, culminating in the lifetime presidency cut short by Ben Ali. Nor does he present other possible reasons, in addition to those stated by Ben Ali and his apologists, for the virulent crackdown on the Islamists in 1991 (p. 193). He does, however, catch the secret of Ben Ali’s success: “In exchange for protection from the “green threat” of Islamic radicalism, the majority of secular Tunisians turned a blind eye to excesses committed by the authorities” (p. 194).

His book also usefully documents the evolution of Tunisian arts and literature, including a vigorous cinema industry (though he did not mention Star Wars much less the origins of its planet outpost of Tataouine, Tunisia’s deep south). Each chronological segment of the arts comes after the politics, as if escaping the heat (cf. p. 198), although artists sometimes convey political truths more effectively in authoritarian regimes than
the politicians or elections. Perkins may in fact be taking Tunisian elections too seriously when he concludes “the prospects for democratizing the political system at least by non-violent means, might well be more dismal than at any time since independence” (p. 212). The regime desperately seeks outside approval and, with fewer strategic rents than Morocco or Algeria, is more vulnerable to disapproval from the EU (if less, these days, from the Americans) and the World Bank, which attaches conditions to its lending program. Nowhere in this book is there mention of the gross corruption of the business mafia around the presidency (cf. Marzouki, pp. 97-102) or even, except as an allegation of defense lawyers, of the routine practice of torture annually documented in US State Department Human Rights reports.

François Siino sheds more light on blockages in contemporary Tunisian politics. Dealing with a relatively abstract technical topic, he gained insights into the inner working of a regime that would probably elude students taking a more direct political approach. A climate of fear pervaded Tunisian universities in the 1990s when he was conducting his research. He selected his theme carefully: the relation of Science to Power is a very special one in a developmental dictatorship like Tunisia’s, whether under Bourguiba or Ben Ali. As the author notes (p. 73), science is a sort of metaphor for politics, because its ostensible rationality covers up any messy conflicting interests and is also the purest expression of development and modernization. Siino extracted 100 fragments from Bourguiba’s speeches collected between 1957 and 1980 in praise of science (pp. 387-391). He also points to many gestures of Ben Ali seeking legitimacy by associating with scientific causes, exhibitions, and popular promotions. His description of the 1991 showdown with the Islamists is more nuanced than that of Perkins and shows how the Ben Ali regime used science as an ideological weapon against those “obscurantists” (p. 362).

His analysis also explains why Tunisia as currently constituted cannot attain the “knowledge-based economy” that is its ostensible ideal, shared by the liberal Arab intellectuals who authored the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) annual Arab Human Development Report (2002-2004). The regime has taken science policy away from the scientists and discouraged any intermediary associations that might have significant inputs. In science as in politics more generally, autonomous intermediaries are viewed as a threat. Tunisian politicians are happy to import successful Tunisian scientists from abroad as long as they do not stay too long and try to wield any effective influence. Despite its “positive” efforts to reverse the brain drain, the UNDP’s assistance in bringing them home for visits may have unintentionally contributed to downgrading the local university scientists, tarred with the “syndicalist” image of “constantly demanding supplementary credits for improbable results” (p. 375). His conclusion looks at the contradictory logics of authoritarian politics and scientific inquiry and understands the isolation of science policy from the scientists to be structural. Scientific meetings are treated like any other public meetings and held under police surveillance (pp. 373-374): although not tortured, the scientists, too, are effectively silenced.

It is too bad that Siino could not update his study, which stops in 1996, to show how Ben Ali finally took over the Internet from IRSIT, Tunisia’s “Rolls Royce” of scientific research institutes (p 360), so as to control it with service providers run by his daughter and close friends, backed up by a specialized cyber police to keep track of email and the
surfing of websites (some of which are also filtered out). These peculiar practices represent an “advance” of the Tunisians over their Maghribi counterparts, however competitive Morocco remains in the more traditional ones of torture and ballot rigging.

A nice test of the Ben Ali regime will be the availability in Tunisia of Dr. Moncef Marzouki’s website at www.moncefmarzouki.net in November 2005, if despite international protests, Tunisia actually hosts the United Nations conference on the future of the Internet. As Marzouki observes of Tunisia’s surrealist battle against free information, “Dictators are like bats. They can only prosper far from light” (p. 11).

Dr. Moncef Marzouki is an internationally recognized pediatric neurologist who is also one of Tunisia’s leading human rights defenders. By his account he became a radical opponent of the Ben Ali regime because he could not excuse torture and refused to accept falsified death certificates in his capacity as president of the Tunisian League of Human Rights (1989-1994). Deprived of his livelihood in Tunisia, he accepted a visiting professorship in 2001 at a leading French medical school but continues to work for human rights for Tunisia and also for the rest of the Arab world. After the Ben Ali regime emasculated the Tunisian League of Human Rights in 1994, Marzouki founded the Conseil National pour les Libertés en Tunisie (CNLT) and became President in 1996 of the Arab Commission on Human Rights. In 2001 he founded a political party, the Congrès pour la République, with the objective of ridding the country of its “false republic and democracy.”

In this book he diagnoses the “Arab illness” of the prohibition of democracy by dictators repressing Islamic fundamentalists. The dictators would have had to invent the green threat anyway (p. 112), to justify repressing their frightened middle classes, but there is a way out. Marzouki rejects the position of the “fundamentalist” secularists among his fellow Francophone elite “democrats.” He observes that these “fundamentalists” comprise only a minority of the Tunisian elite, albeit a majority of Algeria’s putative democrats (p. 146). He argues, however, that the Christian concept of secularism is less relevant to Islam, that most Islamists over a broad spectrum are not totalitarian fanatics, and that it is possible to work with the more reasonable of them while at the same time rejecting possible shari’a demands for medieval corporal punishments.

This review lacks space to go into the details of the 30,000 Tunisians arrested under Ben Ali, many of them tortured, the descriptions of hunger strikes and suicides of those set free, and the cries of prisoners Dr. Marzouki heard during his own periods of captivity. He spent four months and at least one other week and another long weekend in Tunis’s infamous Ministry of the Interior that also serves as a jail and torture chamber downtown on the Ave. Habib Bourguiba (a bit after the Place du 7 Novembre 1987, cf. Perkins, p. 3, but before the National Theater, on the same side of the street). Dr. Marzouki himself was too well known internationally, with strong ties to Amnesty International, to be physically tortured, but his descriptions of others suffering are as graphic in their way as those of Susan Slyomovics’ Moroccans.

Marzouki’s book should be translated into English because American policy-makers would benefit from a liberal, basically Western as well as post-Bourguibian Tunisian view of the Arab world. They might dislike some home truths, as on p. 118: “Arab populations increasingly close themselves off from any discourse about democracy because this term is sauced and served up by those very people who put Arabs and other
Muslims in animal cages at Guantanamo and evidently practice a policy of gross double standards” (p. 118). Perhaps Guantanamo will be terminated before this review is published, but much rethinking will be needed to respond to the emerging publics of these desperate regimes. And with luck and help from the EU in encouraging the democratization of the Middle East and North Africa – so as to get rid of terrorism “the bastard of dictatorship” (p. 117) -- we will hear more from Dr. Marzouki. Washington’s concern with “regime change,” accomplished intelligently, diplomatically, indeed multilaterally, could focus more usefully on Tunisia than on most points further east.

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