Contested Politics in Tunisia

Several thousand new civil society organisations were legally established in Tunisia following the 2010–2011 uprising that forced the long-serving dictator, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, from office. These organisations had different visions for a new Tunisia, and divisive issues such as the status of women, homosexuality and human rights became highly contested. For some actors the transition from authoritarian rule allowed them to have a strong voice that was previously muted under the former regimes. For others, the conflicts that emerged between the different groups brought new repressions and exclusions – this time not from the regime, but from 'civil society'. Vulnerable populations and the organisations working with them soon found themselves operating on uncertain terrain where providing support to marginalised and routinely criminalised communities brought unexpected challenges. Here, Edwige Fortier explores this remarkable period of transformation and the effects of the opening up of public space in this way.

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Civil Society in a Post-Authoritarian State

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For Loretta

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Preface

Since the Arab uprisings began in early 2011, a succession of dictatorships has fallen across the Middle East and North Africa, including in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen. More recently, the broader world beyond the Arab Spring has witnessed a rise of nationalist movements that have used democratic systems and norms to amplify their voices, power and influence. From as early as 2015, populist parties and their accompanying discourses in Europe have increasingly benefited from perceptions of growing insecurity as a result of a combination of factors, including the recurrence of terrorist attacks, worsening economic security and opportunity in an increasingly globalised world and an unprecedented influx of refugees and migrants.[1] Consequently, populist parties and movements won significant inroads throughout 2016–2018 in France (the National Front, renamed in 2018 as the National Rally), Poland (Law and Justice Party), Germany (Alternative for Germany (AfD) Party), Austria (Freedom Party of Austria) and Italy (Five Star Movement and the Northern League). Elsewhere in Europe alone, politically influential populist parties with similar platforms, goals and ideas exist in countries from Denmark to Greece.

The rise of such parties has occurred at the same time as other political shifts that signal deep unease or distrust of longstanding political norms and orthodoxies, including the referendum on the United Kingdom's European Union membership (Brexit) and the presidential election in the United States in 2016, during which a wave of populism surged to destabilise the status quo. Many of these developments, from the Arab Spring to the Brexit, have been grounded in rhetoric and action as representing the will and needs of people who have been ignored, oppressed or delegitimised by unresponsive elites. But this does not mean that the uprisings and movements have opened

[1] J. Luengo-Cabrera, 'How Europe's Deteriorating Peace Is Facilitating the Rise of Populism', LSE-EUROPP Blog, 10 July 2018.

space for all citizens to achieve improved economic, social, legal and political rights and influence. Instead, drawing the line between democracy and authoritarianism today has become a precarious exercise. These movements, each of which shares degrees of xenophobia, racism, sexism, homophobia and anti-Islamic sentiments alongside a myriad of stigmatising attitudes and actions, have several critical impacts and outcomes in common, of which three are particularly noteworthy. The first has been a marked increase in inflammatory remarks and acts by individuals in the highest political offices against minorities and the most marginalised communities, thereby giving voice and licence to individuals to further discriminate with impunity. The second has been politicians' decisions to direct finite resources and international development aid away from the world's poorest and most vulnerable to priorities and initiatives that are more closely associated with building nation-states. And finally, the spaces for agonistic confrontation and debate have been increasingly squeezed, effectively constricting prospects for pluralism and objective analysis more broadly.

This book is about navigating the multiplicity of spaces that open following regime change and the numerous battles that ensue as actors at both social and political levels swiftly move to define a country's national identity and set its highest priorities. As the uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa unfolded in 2010 and 2011, this book originated with a question: What and who constitutes civil society in the region? And what does this mean both for the potential 'success' and 'failure' of nascent movements towards greater plurality and democratisation?

As a development practitioner working in the field of HIV/AIDS and sexual health, I perceived that civil society organisations working with vulnerable and marginalised groups would certainly face insurmountable challenges under authoritarian regimes, including repression and violence. Moreover, I often considered how they operated and under what incentive structures, given the great risks underlying this work. For example, across the Middle East and North Africa same-sex behaviour is criminalised through formal penal codes, sex work outside of legalised institutions is a criminal offense and drug use is illegal. Organisations that work with criminalised and marginalised populations choose to operate in the unlawful, the prohibited and the forbidden.

During the two-year period of critical sociopolitical disruption and transformation following the downfall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia from 2011 to 2013, I disentangle and engage with the concept of civil society theoretically and empirically in the Middle East and North Africa as it relates to marginalised groups and the organisations that choose to work with them in similar challenging settings. More importantly, I strongly advocate the importance of researching marginalised communities who experience the brunt of sociopolitical turmoil and who often struggle to participate in mainstream discursive arenas. What happens at the periphery sheds light on populations who are routinely stigmatised and criminalised, and more worryingly, who often find their human rights eroded as a result of populist decisions and moral panics associated with political transitions.

Overall, the aim of the book is to encourage academics, policymakers and donors who regularly engage with the often overused concept of civil society to do so in a critical manner, one in which the tremendous dynamism and volatility of the interactions and relationships between these groups and actors can be appreciated. The events that transpire following the downfall of an authoritarian regime can provide a snapshot for instructive analysis during a finite but unpredictable period. Ultimately, the aim is to capture, albeit momentarily, these diverse narratives and dynamic struggles as a nation pursues democratisation.

There are many individuals who I would like to acknowledge for their support during the insightful and transformative process to develop this book. First, I want to acknowledge the careful and motivational direction given to me by my PhD supervisor, Dr Michael Jennings, in the Development Studies Department with the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). I would also like to thank the additional members of my Supervisory Committee: Professor Gilbert Achcar in the Development Studies Department and Professor Charles Tripp in the Department of Politics at SOAS. The time and insight each member of my Supervisory Committee gave to me during this process contributed greatly to my efforts and ability to complete this project.

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Most importantly, given the personal and professional challenges they have experienced and their courage in the face of recurring obstacles and threats, I also want to personally thank each individual who kindly allowed me to interview them in Egypt and Tunisia. To protect their voices and to underscore the uncertainty following any sociopolitical transition from authoritarian rule, I have chosen not to name them. In particular, I am grateful to my colleagues who continue to push boundaries and remind decision makers of the need to prioritise the voices of marginalised populations in the Middle East and North Africa. I also owe immeasurable gratitude to the host family with whom I stayed in Tunisia for bringing me into their home and showing me a level of generosity and kindness that I will always

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