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MAY
2023

WHY DOES THE WEST SO OFTEN GET TUNISIA WRONG?



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After the 2011 revolt forced Ben Ali out of power, many Western observers deluded themselves into thinking that Tunisia was successfully building democracy while its Arab neighbours were failing. They had been equally deluded about the quality of the country's economic management before 2011. It has taken them many years to realise that they have got Tunisia wrong.

Western governments have a long tradition of covering up for Arab dictators. The harshness of their criticism of President Kais Saïed may be the result of their getting this small, open country wrong twice since 2000.

many foreign diplomats who had failed to read the situation correctly. Tunisians were less surprised, and thousands poured onto the streets of every town and village to express their relief at what they saw as the comeuppance of a corrupt and incompetent political class.

On 17 April 2023, Rached Ghannouchi, paramount leader of Ennahda since it was founded in the 1980s, was arrested. Twelve years after his triumphal return to Tunis on January 20th 2011, history has come full circle.¹ The counter-revolution has yet to run its full course but rather than produce a new generation of political leaders, the revolt of 2011 “brought back the marginalised elites of the Ben Ali era” (Stevenson, 2022). General Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who was ousted in 2011, had ruled Tunisia for 24 years. The counter-revolution in Tunisia was longer in coming than in any other Arab country but it is too early to write the obituaries of uprisings that, in two waves – in 2011 and 2019 – engulfed most Arabic-speaking countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

A long-term revolutionary process is at work in the region. Western governments, especially in Europe, are deluding themselves if they think they can rely on strong men to ensure the stability of southern-rim Mediterranean countries. Radical political and economic change is needed which is, by its very definition, unpredictable. Social inequality and the underemployment of human resources continue to generate huge social frustration that young people will not endure. European Union (EU) leaders are

1. Rached Ghannouchi has played a central role in the Tunisian Islamic movement since the foundation of Ennahda in the early 1980s. After two decades of exile in London he returned to Tunisia in 2011 and has played a key, and often controversial, role in Tunisian politics ever since.

“**W**e swore to defend the constitution” shouted Samira Chaouachi, deputy speaker of the Tunisian parliament; “We swore to defend the fatherland” the young soldier retorted. This exchange in front of the locked gates of parliament in the early hours of July 22nd 2021 summed up the paradox of Tunisia, a country long seen as the lone success of the Arab Spring. President Kais Saïed’s decision a few hours earlier to dismiss his government and suspend parliament had enraged the Islamist speaker and the deputy speaker and they were seeking to enter the building, which was now guarded by armed troops. Saïed’s move surprised

obsessed by the waves of immigrants from the south and the rise in populism it fuels in Europe but remain in denial about the underlying causes. They made a bold attempt to think strategically 28 years ago when they launched the Barcelona Process in 1995, which fell victim as much to outside circumstances (the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the 9/11 attacks) as to its lack of economic ambition.

Why did the EU and United States (US) fail to appreciate that the counter-revolution started immediately after the Tunisian and Egyptian “revolutions” toppled Ben Ali and Mubarak? Why did they not understand that, after failing initially to launch bold reforms in managing its security apparatus and its economy, Tunisia’s politicians and trade union leaders were driving the country into an impasse? The answer lies, first and foremost, in the very nature of the state

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across the region. By 2011, it was clear to seasoned observers that the liberal economic policy framework favoured by the West – the so-called Washington Consensus – was failing to deliver the economic goods. Today the Washington Consensus is *dead*, but will the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the EU revise their policy prescriptions which, to have a chance of succeeding, must be predicated on rebuilding the state, using public investment as a key tool and fighting the corruption produced by crony capitalism? Only if these countries abide by the rule of law will some of the hundreds of billions of dollars of private capital which has fled abroad come back to North Africa (Ghilès and Snaije, 2022).

The West misreads the Arab revolts: the case of Tunisia

The Arab revolts were met with disbelief by most Western politicians and think tanks. This was surprising, as successive UNDP Arab Human Development Reports (2003, 2005 and 2009) had shown the ballooning unemployment rate in North Africa and the downward trend in the overall ratio of gross capital formation to GDP over the previous quarter of a century, pointing to “the failure of Arab elites to invest locally or regionally [which] is the biggest obstacle to sustained

levels of economic growth” (Bush, 2012). One year on, the Managing Director of the IMF, **Christine Lagarde**, said “let me be frank: we were not paying enough attention to how the fruits of economic growth were being shared” (Lagarde, 2011). In 2014 the World Bank published a report admitting that it had got Tunisia before 2011 quite wrong (Ghilès, 2014 and 2015). Such humility was unusual, if not unprecedented, and begs the question: why do Western political leaders and experts so often get Tunisia wrong?

Beyond the UNDP, some observers did get it right. None more so than Professor Gilbert Achcar (2013) whose “radical exploration of the Arab uprising”, as he describes his book *The People Want*, stands out for its refusal to pull punches when questioning the prevailing liberal doxa. That book, whose English version has recently been reedited with a new introduction, should be required reading for diplomats and security experts – a festering breed in the West when it comes to the Middle East. The author’s grasp of historical context and the rules that dictate Western aid to the Global South offer the reader the keys to understanding a region which need not be condemned to despotism and corruption.

As the revolts spread, the disbelief in Western capitals soon gave way to enthusiasm. It was short-lived. As rulers confronted the desire for change with brutal force, in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria revolts became bloodbaths. Powerful domestic constituencies, notably security forces, strongly supported from outside – by Gulf countries, in particular – were in no mood to allow reforms which might upset the status quo. Others, like Qatar, were out to completely overturn the status quo in favor of client Islamists. “Friendly” foreign actors had no time to seriously influence the outcome in Tunisia, a country of less strategic importance to the big international hitters than Egypt or Syria. Events there proceeded without undue violence. But the very use of the expression “Jasmine Revolution” suggested a misunderstanding. No revolution occurred in Tunisia in January 2011. A violent revolt forced the ruling apparatuses to distance themselves from the head of state and they forced him out to save their privileges. This explains why there was no redistribution of wealth or power across social classes or regions.

Similarly egregious Western misunderstandings manifested themselves after the United States intervened in Libya militarily, and on humanitarian grounds, without considering what would happen

when a small group of highly organized and heavily armed Islamists (whom the US believed it had helped *rehabilitate* during Gaddafi's last years) faced off against a poorly organized non-Islamist majority, a large fraction of which was young and unemployed. The reckoning point was the September 11, 2012 attack against the US mission in Benghazi, which pushed the US out of Libya, turned Libya's East into a rear guard for Al Qaeda (as Al Qaeda and ISIS fled Syria and Iraq), and ramped up the export of terrorism and refugees to Europe, while further destabilizing much of North Africa and the Sahel (Chorin, 2022). This of course included Tunisia, many of whose Jihadists were trained in Libyan camps near the Libya-Tunisian border.

Back in Tunisia, political cronies of the main political parties were offered jobs in the hugely inflated civil service that often existed only on paper, but for which they were paid. The result was to destroy the efficiency of the civil service and hugely increase the wage bill. The inevitable rise in the country's debt crowded out public investment in health, education and infrastructure. Presidents and governments came and went, each and every one borrowing money from the IMF, the World Bank and the European Investment Bank. They all paid lip service to the conditions attached to these loans but never had any intention of implementing them. The IMF and the EU continued to preach a gospel of liberalism and pretended to believe reforms were being enacted. Meanwhile, private investment – both domestic and foreign – declined. Key sectors such as phosphates and fertilisers saw their production collapse while tourism fell victim to terrorism and the COVID pandemic. The poorer hinterland, where all revolts in Tunisia start, continued to be exploited by the richer coast, providing most of the water, wheat and phosphates the country needed.

As elsewhere in the world, the EU and US convinced themselves that free and fair elections pointed to a bright future. Younger Tunisians begged to differ, and fewer people voted at successive elections, with many not even bothering to register. Islamist movements have never shown any interest in addressing the challenges of a modern economy and Ennahda proved no exception. The Tunisian elites, which are well educated, could not agree on a blueprint for economic reform. They failed their country. Twelve years after the fall of Ben Ali, Kais Saied is bringing back the marginalised elites of this period, notably in the security forces. Ghannouchi, the powerful leader of Ennahda who "behaved like a tribal chief", ran the Islamist party "like the underground

organisation it had been in the 1990s" (Stevenson, 2022). He has ended up in prison, unable to convince the army, which has thrown its lot with Saied, that he was "defending the fatherland".

Seasoned observers noted early on that "the Arab uprising.... reached its climax on February 11, the day President Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down. It was peaceful, homegrown, spontaneous and seemingly unified. Lenin's theory postulated that a victorious revolution required a structured and disciplined political party, robust leadership and a clear program. The Egyptian revolution, like its Tunisian precursor and unlike the Iranian revolution of 1979, possessed no organisation nor identifiable leader nor an unambiguous agenda" (Agha and Malley, 2011). As protests turned violent in many countries, divisions came to the fore and old political parties and economic elites contended for power, "leaving many protestors

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with the feeling that the history they were making not so long ago is now passing them by" (Ibid). The naivety of those who led the revolt in Tunisia allowed established forces to hijack their agenda and block change. Thus, Lenin turned out to be right after all, meaning that "a counterrevolution (could not) be ruled out. It happened in Algeria in the 1990s and there is nothing to say it will not happen again" (Ghilès, 2011/2012). Very few researchers were willing to eat humble pie as the World Bank had the courage to do (Wallaert *et al.*, 2011).

Some academics proclaimed the country "An Arab anomaly".² The *Washington Post* gushed that Tunisia was "the only country to give birth to a real democracy" while the *Financial Times* asked, "why did Tunisia's Arab Spring experience succeed when others have failed?"³ Delusion became a widespread feature of many Western

2. Masri (2017). In the foreword to the book, professor Lisa Anderson writes, "it is not yet clear that the Tunisian experience is the success that both Tunisians and the rest of the world hope it will be". She goes on to quote the former Chinese premier, Zhou Enlai, who observed in 1972, when asked about the impact of the French Revolution, that it may be "too early to say".

3. Endorsement of the book *Tunisia: an Arab Anomaly* by Safwan Masri (Columbia University Press, 2017), published on its back dust jacket. The comments are by David Ignatius, *Washington Post*, and Roula Khalaf, Deputy Editor, *Financial Times*.

attitudes as it had been before 2011. Prior to that date, the World Bank and Western observers would praise the country's economic performance. After the fall of Ben Ali, they praised its success as a democracy. It is easier to understand, in such a context, why European leaders failed to think strategically about Tunisia.

The nature of the state in North Africa impedes reforms

Western analysts of North Africa and the Middle East too often project their own view of the world onto countries whose history is different. The semantic tools of modern economic thought were the result of a rethinking of the state and international relations that goes back to the 18th century. More to the point, where the role of the state in the economy is concerned, they

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can be traced to John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946), who refined the arguments about the meaning of economic development, the role of international trade, the purpose of finance and how to redistribute wealth. The intense intellectual and political debate around his ideas, which have played such an important role in Western political life since the end of the First World War, has no equivalent in the MENA region. This helps to explain why the West often misreads the rationale behind the behaviour of modern Middle Eastern states. Leaders there seldom focus on increasing the country's wealth but on staying in power, not least by controlling which newcomers join the elite, the *makhzen*.

From the 1980s onwards, the IMF and the World Bank abided by a set of ideological tenets which became known as the Washington Consensus: the state should be slimmed down to make way for private investment. This neo-liberal doxa was already failing in Tunisia by the turn of the century but that did not stop the World Bank from putting Tunisia forward as a model of good economic governance to be followed in Africa and the Middle East (Institut de la Méditerranée, 2000). The EU sang from the same hymn sheet and came unstuck. The ultimate irony is that the laggard of yesteryear, Morocco, seems to have achieved rather more in economic terms than its neighbours – though the high rate of illiteracy, continuing poverty and huge accumulation of wealth at the top suggest that long-term success is far from guaranteed.

The MENA region has rich hydrocarbon resources and “includes more states that are overwhelmingly dependent on rent than any other part of the world. This in turn leads to some state benefitting, due to strategic and security considerations, from rents drawn on richer states' hydrocarbon rents or determined by foreign powers' eagerness to maintain a regional system of hegemony whose key motivation is narrowly linked to the region's resources” (Achcar, 2023: xi). That this region includes many patrimonial states “where any separation between the ruling families and the institutions of governments simply is a polite fiction” (Ibid) compounds the problem. To expect countries where the ruling family regards the government as its private property and the elite security forces as its private guard to use the tools Keynes spent a lifetime constructing leads to absurd conclusions and failed policy prescriptions.

For all its emancipation of women and tolerant attitudes to foreigners, Tunisia's economic wealth is tightly controlled by a few families whose grip is reinforced by a corporatist system which allows them to virtually control the state.

Far from providing new ideas and helping create a broad left-wing party after 2011, the powerful trade union UGTT was happy to see the political parties inflate the number of workers on the state payroll (in the process increasing its membership), which has bankrupted the country. Its leaders have chosen to act as the gravediggers of reforms rather promote an open debate about them. During his rule, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali managed the economy, carving out ever greater rents for his family, but he never reformed it (Ghilès and Woertz, 2018). He was not very literate in economic affairs.

Regarding Morocco, as King Hassan II launched reforms in 1993, he set up a think tank, the G14, which brought together the country's brightest economists and entrepreneurs. They paid lip service to the Washington Consensus but developed policies in keeping with what they saw as Morocco's strategic interests. When presented with the blueprint for economic reform by his advisers in 1988, Algerian President Chadli Bendjedid understood that their proposals amounted to “a revolution”.⁴ The reformist group led by head of government Mouloud Hamrouche (1989–1991) was “not aiming at economic ‘liberalisation’ as understood in the orthodoxy of neo-liberal ‘transition-from-

4. Interviews by the author (North Africa correspondent for the *Financial Times* 1977–1994) with the presidents of Tunisia (November 1989), Algeria (June 1991) and the king of Morocco (November 1994). See also Ghilès (1998).

socialism' theory. For one thing, their problem was not the country's notional commitment to socialism, which had in any case become increasingly vacuous since 1976, but the reality of its dysfunctional state capitalism" (McDougall, 2017). Like their Moroccan counterparts a few years later, the ideas developed in the blueprint for reform (the *Cahiers de la Reforme*) between 1986 and 1988 were home-grown (*Cahiers de la Reforme*, 1990) and piloted by an economist, Abderrahmane Hadj Nacer (2011), who went on to become governor of the central bank of Algeria from 1989 to 1992.

Will the West ever change its neo-liberal script?

In the first edition of his book, Achcar (2013: 65) asked why Western experts did "not even dare suggest that Arab petrodollars be massively redirected to job-creating investments in the region, Marshal Plan style?" The international institutions "cannot go so far as to suggest that the oil monarchies stop investing their capital in Western economies, particularly in the United States, and transfer it to Arab governments instead, on the model of the aid that the United States provided its European allies from 1948 to 1951" (Ibid). That is an unlikely turn of events, as Western banks would lose huge opportunities to make money and the Gulf monarchies had much influence in Paris, London and Washington.

Meanwhile capital continues to flee the region to the safe haven of Western banks and companies – North Africa alone has hundreds of billions of "private" money in foreign banks (Ghilès and Snaije, 2022). The younger elites are now fleeing as well, to the immediate benefit of the Gulf, Canada, France and its neighbours, but to the detriment of long-term stability in the Mediterranean. In North Africa, the "cold war" between Algeria and Morocco explains why trade and investment flows between the three countries are minimal. This situation is all the more absurd considering that Algerian oil, gas, sulphur and ammonia could, in tandem with Moroccan phosphates, generate many jobs and large exports. The tensions between the two suited the West for decades but the pressure of new immigrants in Europe fuels populist parties and the risk of domestic turbulence in countries such as Italy and France.

A further irony of the neo-liberal script is that China and Turkey are increasing their commercial ties with North Africa (after Italy, China is the second-most important source of imports for Tunisia and Turkey the fourth)

but not their investments. In all three North African countries, Western private capital continues to play a key role. The EU and the US are also discovering, to their dismay, that North African leaders, as elsewhere in the Global South, do not share their reading of the war in Ukraine. They note that the West views its problems as the world's problems, but they beg to differ. The multipolar world we find ourselves in makes Algeria's old-fashioned Third-Worldism seem familiar. The elites of all three countries are suspicious of the former colonial power, though the Moroccans are too shrewd to let on publicly.

The earlier Europe wakes up to the fact that the countries beyond its southern shores deserve an ambitious policy, a new and bolder Barcelona Process, the better. The earlier they understand that Islamism is not the region's natural inclination, as many, notably the US and the United Kingdom, were inclined to after

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2011, and give up their tinpot Orientalism, the better. Moving on from the patrimonial or neo-patrimonial state presents a historic challenge for the MENA region and for Europe. As its muted reaction to the overthrow of Egyptian President Morsi a year after he was elected in free elections in July 2012 showed, the West never seems to attach that much importance to elections. The reaction of the United States towards Kais Saied's disregard for the basic rules of democracy suggests that Western attitudes have not changed. Until it accepts that a complete overhaul of the patrimonial or neo-patrimonial state is a prerequisite for faster growth, greater social inclusion and thus long-term stability in Tunisia and the broader MENA region, the EU Commission will have to accept that its endless position papers which aim to "improve" its neighbourhood policies smack of playing to the crowds.

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