State and Society in the Maghreb

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STATE AND SOCIETY IN THE MAGHREB

Lise Garon. ***Dangerous Alliances: Civil Society, the Media and Democratic Transition in North Africa.*** London: Zed Books, 2003. 205 pp. Bibliography. Index. $69.95. Cloth. $27.50. Paper.

Stephen J. King. ***Liberalization Against Democracy: The Local Politics of Economic Reform in Tunisia.*** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. 176 pp. Bibliography. Index. $44.95. Cloth. $21.95. Paper.

With the greater scrutiny given to Arab states and societies by U.S. officials and citizens after 9/11, one would hope that the market would be expanded for thoughtful books analyzing politics in Arab North Africa. Indeed, the two books reviewed here are examples of a recent emphasis by Arab academic specialists on trying to understand the resilience of nondemocratic governments throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Lise Garon and Stephen King adopt two distinct analytical and methodological strategies to present important and complementary conclusions about contemporary authoritarian stability in North Africa, with an emphasis on Tunisia. Garon's study compares the broad political patterns of the three major North African (or Maghrebi) regimes in order to construct a general argument. King, on the other hand, looks in much more depth at a small Tunisian community as a way of illustrating the general through the particular. If neither study is entirely satisfactory in framing and addressing basic questions of why nondemocratic Arab political systems remain powerful, the problem is due more to the difficulties of finding an ideal balance between specialized academic studies and general analyses of Arab politics than to the weaknesses of the volumes themselves. This essay aims to contextualize the difficulty of publishing books such as Garon's and King's, in addition to discussing their individual arguments.

Within the field of political science, and to some extent, the social sciences more generally, studies of Arab countries have been in a precarious situation. The turn in recent years toward political science methodology that emphasizes rational choice models of individual behavior and quantitative survey research data has contributed to the impression that Arab politics offers little generalizable theory to the discipline as a whole. To a large extent, however, this impression has been a self-fulfilling prophecy. Arab societies have been expected to conform to Western models or respond to Western questions. In particular, a major focus of American political science has been the failure of Arab political systems to become democratic, as opposed to how these systems have functioned in their own terms, or whether Western involvement in the Middle East might have some connection to Arab social dynamics.

The gulf between understanding Arab politics and society in terms of

its disappointments to Westerners versus its own processes has only widened as Arab countries have been more prominent in the American media since 9/11. Indeed, the belief of some political actors in Washington that the United States can bring democratic stability to Iraq and perhaps to the region as a whole can easily have as its corollary the assumption that it is unnecessary to account for how closed and unpopular regimes have survived when it may be possible to replace them. Thus Arab states and societies are an increasing focus of discussion in the United States, but this discussion can neglect how the states and societies actually function.

Academic specialists in Arab politics have dealt with this situation by putting forward a variety of new and interesting studies that insist that Arab authoritarian regimes be studied not strictly in terms of how they fail to fit Western political models, but in terms of what has characterized and sustained them as they are. The journal *Comparative Politics* recently devoted an issue to a rich range of studies that look in a variety of nuanced ways at how and why Arab political systems have endured. In introducing these diverse analyses, the issue's editor argues that "the study of resilient authoritarianism is normatively imperative for a discipline that has largely turned its back on this region and on other stubbornly nondemocratic countries" (Posusney 2004:135).

The books under review also fit into the category of accounts of Arab politics by knowledgeable specialists who intend to see North African societies in their own terms. Both provide thoughtful and distinct analyses centered on Tunisian politics and propose arguments to account for the difficulty of political liberalization in societies like Tunisia.

Dangerous Alliances is a carefully crafted study of the political dynamics of the three former French colonies in North Africa, with the most detailed material from Tunisia. Its basic argument about the resilience of authoritarianism in North Africa is political. Garon maintains that "alliances between the government and civil actors were formed at the expense of freedom" (3). These connections between authoritarian regimes and particular groups within the society are the "dangerous alliances" of Garon's title, for they have the effect of encumbering the development of strong, autonomous civil institutions and the rule of law, both of which Garon considers to be necessary, if not sufficient, for representative political systems.

She develops her themes through parallel treatment of all three countries. This is useful, given the interesting divergence she observes with respect to politics in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Algeria experienced a rapid period of political opening, followed by the army's reassertion of control and a bloody civil war. Morocco underwent a very gradual process of opening, managed by the quasi-traditional king. Tunisia suffered through the opposite trend, a repression of political freedoms that shifted the characteristics of the regime to what Garon terms a "totalitarian dictatorship" (7). According to her account of

the divergent directions authoritarianism took in these three societies, states and actors in civil society need a certain amount of mutual dependence to thrive. However, rulers will often take advantage of this dependence to eradicate civil society before members of the latter can establish enough influence to serve as sources of social pressure. Garon highlights Morocco as the only example in her study of a country in which a civil society is developing through a stable process.

A second part of the book follows Garon's basic analysis of how dangerous alliances between North African governments and groups in civil society have generally amplified authoritarianism. This second section attempts to add another dimension to the political landscape by looking at the ways in which international media can both deter and foster political opening. The chapters in this section are interesting in themselves, providing discussions of the role of propaganda in Tunisia, the links between international newspapers and military takeover in Algeria, and the nature of Islam as a discourse of politics and dissidence in Tunisia. Taken together, however, they do not provide an integrated framework or general theory about how transnational media overcome the North African authoritarian state's tendency to squelch internal political pluralism. Indeed, this section, which includes virtually no discussion of Morocco, appears to be a hasty concatenation of loosely related articles rather than a coherent work.

On the whole, Garon's book provides a variety of important insights about North African politics in a form that is often accessible, sensible, and potentially of value to specialists in North African politics. Because many of the chapters describe politics on a national scale and are not heavily footnoted, a nonspecialist reader will easily overcome simple stereotypes about Islam and Arab political culture. However, the book's relative accessibility may also have something to do with the fact that its argument is sometimes sketchy and unsubstantiated. For a true expert in North African politics, Garon offers useful interpretations but without the sort of causal models or analytical structure that are expected in contemporary North American political science.

For the sort of political scientific argument that is missing in *Dangerous Alliances*, one can turn to Stephen King's *Liberalization Against Democracy*, which also focuses on Tunisia. Indeed, in order to offer as tight an analysis as possible, King zeroes in on an exemplar community within Tunisia, the village of Tebourba, to illustrate connections between political economy and authoritarianism.

King's argument is that privatizing a national economy, a strategy often assumed by neoliberal theory and Western leaders to be necessary for political liberalization, can actually increase authoritarian stability by fostering local clients that are beholden to whatever regime is in power. When market-oriented reforms are used to exaggerate economic inequality, especially in rural areas, greater central political control rather than political

opening is the likely result. This is what the author means by liberalization against democracy.

The book draws on a wealth of interviews and data on land distribution and use from Tebourba to suggest that Tunisia's move from a state-managed to a more private economy involved alliances between the regime and local large landholders. Such alliances fostered the reinvigoration and reinvention of traditional cultural themes of patronage, family, and Islamic religious duty. King documents how privatization has forced poorer Tunisians to depend on local wealthy elites, who alone connect with the national government. He also explicitly discusses how the behavior of the Tunisians whom he interviewed connects to rational choice and other models of behavior that are currently in vogue among American political scientists.

King's analysis is useful, for it turns on their head two frequent assumptions from within the policy community: (1) that privatizing market reform stimulates democracy, and (2) that Islam represents a radical challenge to the political stability of Western-leaning governments. He demonstrates that market reform can, in fact, go hand-in-hand with increasing authoritarian control, and that repressive governments themselves, including those on good terms with Western leaders, try to use Islam to increase the quiescence of their citizens.

King's thesis, though well-stated and populated with rich local sources, is open to debate. In particular, it is unclear how much of the pattern of elite domination that he documents in Tebourba really was different under the more populist, socialist orientation of the Habib Bourgiba government. How much of a new or salient phenomenon did the retraditionalization of Tunisian local politics and power relations of Ben 'Ali's regime represent, and how much of this was truly caused by market privatization? King addresses this question with a helpful focus on Ben 'Ali's political party, the RCD, as a mechanism for amplifying the control of rural elites. Yet how much actually changed under Ben 'Ali and how much of the increased authoritarianism really was cemented through market reforms remain intriguing questions at the end of *Liberalization Against Democracy*. An expanded effort to compare the case of Tunisia to other countries in the last chapter would have helped amplify the argument.

Nonetheless, King's book remains an articulate and valuable study that allows Tunisians to speak for themselves within a coherent and stimulating intellectual framework. It deserves to be read widely precisely for the reasons that it is unlikely to be read widely—its depth of reasoning, its wealth of specific local information, and its contradiction of stereotypes about free markets and democracy. Throughout the book King voices a point made by many Arab and knowledgeable Western observers, namely, that growing economic and social inequities, along with increasing political repression, rather than popular anti-Americanism or Islam, are the true challenges that bedevil the region. Moreover, it is easy to see how frustrated, impover-

ished people in places like Tebourba may come to blame the government of the United States, which preaches market privatization as gospel and provides diplomatic and economic support to unpopular, antidemocratic regimes such as Tunisia's. Unfortunately, the mass of argumentative detail that might have made King's book a serious contribution to political science is lacking, making it unlikely that the work's local knowledge and broad insights will become known beyond a small group of expert colleagues.

American-based specialists of the Middle East have come increasingly under fire by right-wing critics for failing to appreciate the problems that inspired the attacks on American and other Western targets in recent years. Both of these books suggest that these critiques are off-target. They illustrate that the problem with contemporary academic work on Arab societies is not that it fails to document a level of popular political and social discontent with regimes tied to the United States that is consistent with the sort of hostility that can inspire violent action. Rather, the problem lies with the increasing difficulty of finding the right level of explanatory detail and rigor to attract both a mainstream and specialist audience.

Reference

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