

Review – Ben Ali's Tunisia

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Ben Ali's Tunisia: Power and Contention in An Authoritarian Regime

By Anne Wolf

Oxford University Press, 2023

Many analysts have retrospectively claimed that they had foreseen the demise of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia for some time. While some had indeed pointed out that the rising tide of popular frustration and anger against the president and his family was starting to translate into a dynamic mobilisation of opposition, the sheer speed with which one of the seemingly most solid and institutionally-embedded authoritarian political systems in the region fell apart took pretty much everyone by surprise. Much of what had been written on Tunisian politics since Ben Ali's assumption to power had suggested that the country offered something of a masterclass in authoritarian resilience. Despite evidence of unrest in marginalised regions as Tunisia's economy stumbled, political power was concentrated, and corruption escalated, the president appeared to rule with a vice-like grip. The question on everyone's minds: "How had it all fallen apart at such a pace?"

Early reports of the events which led to Ben Ali and his family leaving the country relied heavily on the self-interested formal statements of the new leadership, as well as a swirling morass of rumours and speculation, which, combined, offered few genuinely reliable clues. As the transition progressed, analysts focused their attention on the seemingly irresistible 'power of the people': the politics of contention that were manifested in the activism and resistance of social movements, civil society, and opposition politics, both before and during the uprising. Some of this work has undoubtedly provided important illumination on the politics of the contemporary Middle East, including, for example, Charles Tripp's work on resistance (Tripp, 2013), John Chalcraft's on popular politics (Chalcraft, 2016) and Asef Bayat and Frédéric Volpi's on revolution (Bayat, 2017; Volpi, 2017). But as Anne Wolf rightly points out, this focusing of the gaze has left a lacuna not only in our understanding of the events of the time, but of the role played by the ruling parties of authoritarian regimes in sustaining their resilience, or, alternatively, in facilitating their demise.

The Untold Story of a Ruling Party

In this impressive study, Wolf refocuses our attention on the role of inner regime processes in determining the eventual collapse of authoritarian rule. Her puzzle comes from early post-uprising interviews with followers of the *Democratic Constitutional Rally* (RCD), previously known as the *Socialist Destourian Party* (PSD), who, far from being despondent at their abandonment by the despot, were both celebrating it and even claiming to have been active participants in the uprising itself. Their statements appeared to contradict prevailing theories that ruling parties are stabilising forces in authoritarian systems. Wolf's interlocutors instead suggested that the RCD had itself been a site of dissent against Ben Ali for some time, and that internal contention had undermined the willingness and capacity of the party to be useful to the dictator at the crucial moment: when he might otherwise have mobilised it in his own defence.

Over ten years, Wolf has interviewed just about everybody who was anybody—and quite a few others—at all levels of the party and the political regime (Ben Ali himself and his second wife Leila being obvious and understandable exceptions). The list is extraordinary and provides Wolf the opportunity to compose a detailed account of the rise and fall of Ben Ali's regime, as well as the accompanying role and fortunes of the RCD. The narrative chapters begin by

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covering Ben Ali's early consolidation of power (Chapter Two) through the advance of a correctivist strategy which enabled him to rid the PSD of Bourguibist loyalists and mobilise new ranks of supporters around promises for 'democratisation' (p.48) within the party (read as opportunities for upwards mobility). The role of ideas was crucial here; public intellectuals were recruited to lobby for Ben Ali with promises of political liberalisation, social reconciliation, and economic reform.

In Chapter Three, Wolf describes how Ben Ali 'fortified' (p.83) his rule by drawing on the dual narrative priorities of promoting strong economic performance and defending the country from violent political Islam. Opposition was securitised and institutional power was concentrated around the president himself. The RCD was transformed by the recruitment of new 'lumpen activists' (p.93): uneducated thugs who had material, rather than political, interests in joining the party, and whose loyalties lay with the regime rather than the institution's ideological legacies. RCD cadres penetrated every institution and association, tightening the regime's control and surveillance over society, but also alienating the party old guard who still held a Destourian vision for Tunisia. Once again, ideas were put to service: technocratisation enabled Ben Ali to replace historic party leaders with political 'no-weights' who posed no threat to himself (p.118); the introduction of a loyal opposition through a tame pluralisation process created a veneer of authoritarian legitimation; and the pursuit of 'solidarity' (p.114) allowed the symbolic goal of independence to be recrafted around 'socio-economic, technical and cultural achievements' (p.111), rather than political freedom.

Chapter Four introduces the Ben Ali family. One almost feels sorry for the president as his two wives and their clans hustle for greater influence, to muzzle opponents, and to plunder the country's wealth. His second wife, Leila, and her family, the Trabelsis, seemed to triumph, tightening the circle of power around themselves and manoeuvring to secure the succession, not least by parachuting themselves into the most senior positions of the RCD. Senior party officials concentrated on promoting Trabelsi business interests, something that did not escape the attention of low-level members who were themselves increasingly feeling the strains of a faltering economy.

The influential family of Ben Ali's first wife, Naima Kefi, on the other hand, were considered less greedy and more embedded in the party leadership which had risen with Ben Ali in the early years of his rule. But by 2008 there was a swathe of party members who not only sympathised with the Gafsa protesters, but understood their own passivity as a form of resistance. The RCD party congress in 2008 was a crucial turning point, being described as the true 'end' of the party (p.170). Ben Ali awarded himself yet another term in office while the rest of the congress deteriorated into a fight between Belhassan Trabelsi and Saker El-Materi over who should succeed him thereafter. With little-to-nothing left of an autonomous ideologically-driven vehicle, party members abstained *en masse* from voting in the 2010 municipal elections.

Revolution Comes for the RCD

The scene is then set for the 2011 mass protests; the absence of significant RCD counter-mobilisation is explained. Younger party members joined the protests themselves not in opposition to the party, but out of frustration with its hijacking by the Trabelsi family. Older members were leaderless. Ben Ali was so focused on a securitised response that he did not even try to draw on party resources. In their own silent protest, they packed up their offices and went home, many hiding in fear of public retribution. The redundancy of the party leadership becomes clear as members of the National Assembly are described as 'panic stricken, seeking behavioural cues from others' (p.199).

In the end, the fall of the regime came down to the actions of a small number of key individuals: the presidential security advisor who urged Ben-Ali to board the plane with his family as crowds moved towards the airport, as well as the defence minister who seized the moment to push the cabinet to enact a constitutional coup d'état (maybe hoping to later seize power for himself). As the country's leaders rushed to save themselves, the grassroots structures of the party fell apart and there was nothing left to resist the final dissolution of the party in March 2012.

Wolf's story is compelling and fills in several significant gaps from previous accounts of the uprisings. Through exhaustive interviews, she gives substance to shadowy figures around the president like Chadli Neffarti, Abderrahim Zouari, Hedi Baccouche, Abdelaziz Ben Dhia, and Ridha Grira. Her argumentation is sound: that while quantitative approaches to comparative politics tell us a great deal, we should not neglect the role of ideas, norms, and legitimacy

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in understanding the complexities and variation within authoritarian institutions, as well as the dynamism of contention within ruling parties. In particular, she proposes two variables that determine the relationship between party members and an incumbent leader. Firstly, party members are sensitive to the opportunity structures within party apparatus; if they hold no sway over the leader, their satisfaction frays and they develop grievances of their own. Secondly, a leader may mobilise party support by other means; for instance, by promoting a correctivist strategy which brings in once-alienated members to a familiar but renovated and inclusive project. Alternatively, or sequentially, a leader can establish new normative priorities for the party which re-construct the legitimacy of authoritarian rule.

In the case of Tunisia, Ben Ali was initially successful in drawing the PSD around his correctivist approach and then in establishing new normative priorities for Tunisia. But the instruments through which he tightened his personal grip on power progressively diminished the opportunities for party personnel to influence policy even within the party itself. The salience of the ideas and norms which had underpinned his authoritarian legitimisation strategy diminished as they were shown to be hollow instruments for securing his own power, as well as his family's. The result was that dissent began to ferment within his own party, eroding its own institutional and political capacities.

A Theory of Power and Contention

Whether this constitutes the full-blown theory of power and contention within ruling parties in authoritarian systems to which Wolf lays claim is debateable. She deploys examples of other ruling parties and their leaders at points within the book to support her case, which, while never amounting to full-on comparative consideration, nevertheless warrant further exploration. One might also quibble over the degree of admittedly qualified confidence she ultimately places in the testimonies of individuals who have much to gain in making retrospective assertions of internal party dissent. Nevertheless, this is an invaluable and meticulously researched contribution to our understanding of the workings of ruling parties in authoritarian regimes, and, more specifically, the political machinery of the Ben Ali period of Tunisian history.

References

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