

Vulnerable Citizenship: Structural Deficiencies in the Maghreb

END OF THE YEAR **REVIEW** – *CRITICAL INSIGHT*

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The year of 2021 has been politically eventful for the Maghreb. Tunisia has witnessed a major political coup in July, while August sounded the death-knell for any possibility of reconciliation between Morocco and Algeria. A decade following the so-called Arab Spring, 2021 confirmed a trend; since the independences, the region appears to be stuck with the same structural problems: failing and/or slow socioeconomic development, decreasing prospects for democratization, and poor regional integration.

Tunisia, a country that, for the past decade, seemed like the only hope for a genuine democratic experience within the region, has been backpedaling on its democratic promises since the measures undertaken by president Kais Saied to “correct the revolution’s trajectory” on the 25th of July. The initiative, essentially a bloodless coup, is pretty revealing of the difficulties to maintain political reforms within an endemically corrupted socioeconomic environment where democratic institutions constantly fail the test of impartiality and efficiency. Corruption here must be understood in its large meaning, when monopoly on vital economic sectors and difficulties to diversify exports render a country so non-competitive that its citizens are constantly crushed in the global economy. It is the type of corruption that renders citizens so vulnerable they might lose faith in the legitimacy of the state itself, and resort to other forms of collective organization.

The Tunisian laboratory for democracy is evidence that focusing on building institutions, independent media, transparent elections, and other traditional aspects of democracy-building is simply not enough, unlike many predicted. Practicing democracy takes time, and the economy does not wait. What we tend to forget is that the economies of former colonies have yet to be integrated within capitalism as something other than subcontractors for economic giants. Western counterparts have been insisting on a return to a form of parliamentary democracy, while Tunisians are increasingly divided over supporting or opposing Saied's initiative for a referendum on the political system. The conversation remains principally political, yet the country might have to resort to the Paris Club in the near future, rendering the possibility of an economic collapse imminent.

Prospects are not much brighter for Tunisia's neighbor on the west. The fall in revenues from oil and gas exports, combined with the impact of the pandemic on the 2020 GDP, have plunged the Algerian economy into recession, highlighting its difficulty to diversify its public revenues. Morocco, while undeniably doing better economically than its neighbors, has a major problem of income inequality. In 2013, the share of national income of the richest 10% stood twelve times higher than the share of national income of the poorest 10% of the population. The Maghreb accounts for amongst the highest rate of youth unemployment in the world.

When it comes to basic needs, citizens around the world have since long expressed the same demands: livable wages, reliable and affordable healthcare, quality public education, and a safe environment. Security, in its large sense, is a universal request. Now, imagine how far from feeling secure someone is in order to immolate himself, or throw himself and his family in the treacherous waters of the Mediterranean Sea. Yet, those two extreme forms of protesting are not uncommon amongst Maghrebi citizens. The Arab Spring itself started with the self-immolation of a street vendor in a poor Tunisian governorate and spread like wildfire across the Arab world. Not because there were dark forces agitating public anger, but because grievances were widely shared, and widely known.

DEPENDENT ECONOMIES

By now, arguing for the possibility for the South to catch up with the West's development is wishful thinking. More than two decades following the EU-North Africa trade agreements there has been little convergence with incomes in Europe, and the absolute difference in income levels might be increasing.

This is where the postcolonial Theory of Dependency comes in handy. Its logic is supported by a brief look at goods trade between the Maghreb and the EU for instance; underdevelopment is mainly understood as the result of the peripheral status of former colonies in the world economy. Underdeveloped countries provide cheap labor and raw materials on the world market. These resources are sold to advanced economies, which are able to convert them into finished products. Underdeveloped countries then proceed to purchasing the manufactured goods at high prices, depleting the capital they could have used to improve their own production capacity. The result is a vicious circle that has durably split the world economy between a rich core and a poor periphery. A single culture and export orientation, neglect of food production sectors, widening regional, sectoral, and social gaps, and foreign control of modern sectors constitute what has been qualified as "dependent development", or simply underdevelopment. It should be noted underdevelopment here is not simply a backwardness that can be caught up, nor is it an intermittent stage in the general modernization process, but a structural feature of southern economies.

In this context, it is increasingly hard for ruling powers to maintain legitimacy without resorting to harmful strategies in the long run. While Tunisia has seen a rise in populism in the discourse of President Kais Saied, who is now confronted with the reality of the exercise of power, Algeria and to a lesser extent, Morocco, have relied on marketing the threat of an external enemy, each being the enemy of the other, to distract from internal political dissidence and economic hardship. Perhaps the clearest indicator of how damaging regional disintegration is for Maghrebi citizens is the growing number of irregular migrants arriving at European shores from the Maghreb every month.

DISSONANCE OVER DEMOCRACY

Democracy means then, first and foremost, renegotiating the social contract between letdown citizens and a state whose added value is unclear. What do Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and other neighboring countries offer to their citizens

today? Is it good and affordable healthcare? Quality public education? Clean and safe neighborhoods? Reasonable chances to find employment? Decent salaries? All these taken-for-granted rights in most parts of the developed world are painfully lacking for Maghrebi citizens living in the twenty-first century and having access to a myriad of tools to compare their standards of life to others. If the democratic promise does not guarantee a path towards a better livelihood, as it did not in the case of Tunisia, then democracy will remain perceived as an experience supported by international organizations and technocratic funds, which lacks any ties to the everyday life of most citizens.

The failure of the Arab Spring is not without consequences. We observe a growing trend of nostalgia over authoritarian times, or simply citizens who uphold the status quo in fear of losing the few privileges they have. Of course, freedom of speech is important, but it means little when there is no food on the table, or when the size of bread has been shrinking in the past decade. Vulnerability needs reassurance, and what is better than the paternal figure of the providential man to occupy this role. In Tunisia, Kais Saied's rise and increasingly divisive narrative falls under a populist logic. Despite a catastrophic socioeconomic situation, he insists on blaming Tunisians' misery on external and internal "enemies of the nation" without ever confronting the public about the development model's structural deficiencies and the fact there is little to no option left than to undergo drastic budgetary cuts in public spending.

Hence, when assessing the democratic prospects of the Maghreb, one needs to follow the money. It will tell you some families save for months to help their son or daughter reach the other shore of the Mediterranean. It will tell you some others leave not for lack of money, but for lack of a dignified life. It will remind you, in essence, that citizenship needs not to be mere ink on paper and that democracy is not about what political system we chose, but about what prospects and protection any system offers.