BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by Rikke Hostrup Haugbølle

Almost 12 years after the courageous popular uprising in Tunisia came to an end in January 2011, the former president for 30 years Ben Ali and his family fled the country, and Tunisia embarked on the extremely challenging path of regime change. Many had hoped that the process of democratization would succeed, as testified by the Democracy Report in 2023, which was released by the V-Dem Institute. By 2023, Tunisia is no longer a democracy. Since President Saied froze the parliament in July 2021, and took over power in Tunisia, development has taken new turns weekly. Once again, one has to be tunnel-visioned to be able to follow the rapidly changing events. Hence, the nine contributions in the volume *A Fledgling Democracy*, edited by Mohamed Zayani, are timely. The essays proffer a look back at the decade after the uprising when Tunisia was undergoing a democratization process, especially as the many important personalities, changes, and processes are fading away due to constant evolution.

Mohamed Zayani’s introduction provides a compact and fast-forward summary of the political development in the decade following the uprising. Although the chapter misses important historical sequences here and there – for instance, neglecting to mention the political party Nida Tounes – the introduction warms up the reader to dive into the following chapters. In Chapter 2, the distinguished scholar Marina Ottaway also takes us through the political events of the first decade but digs a bit deeper, to explore the causes of Tunisia’s failure and the costs in the effort to install a democratic system (32). One of the significant aspects of the Tunisian democratization process was the plethora of transitional institutions that were set up, as well as the internal political rivalries, which at times stalled the institutions’ work and the overall process. This is the scope of Chapter 3 by Enrique Klaus in which he discusses the case of the Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication. In charge of regulating the Tunisian audiovisual sector, this transitional body was controlled by the regime prior to the uprising. The reader is taken on a, at times difficult, tour de force through the many

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rivalries, which demonstrate the deep complexity of Tunisia’s politics at the macro level. Tunisia’s historical Islamist party Ennahda was a main actor at this level, and the focus of Chapter 4 by Fabio Merone. Publications on Ennahda after the uprising are countless, and the chapter is a good introduction to understanding Ennahda’s ideology and politics.

In Chapter 5, Zuzana Hudáková analyses the transformation, functions, and diversity of civil society in Tunisia. She includes a historical perspective to understanding the present, hence overcoming the divide of pre-and post-2011 uprising Tunisia. Likewise, Alyssa Miller’s essay in Chapter 7 is an ethnographic study to study the “shadow regions” — central, northern, and southern Tunisia where hopelessness has for long been the everyday life for poor Tunisian youth. This contrast is refreshing especially when compared with many (foreign) political scientists’ analyses of Tunisia’s democratization. Chapter 8 by Ruth Hanau Santini analyses the topic of security and the Islamist attack on the town of Ben Guerdane in 2016. Hanau Santini also deploys field work “from below” as her point of departure, to shed light on the macro level of Tunisia’s democratization. In the final chapter, Alexandra Domike Blackman explores what Tunisia’s past can tell us about the future by describing the conventional “eras,” concluding that long-term political patterns continue to shape Tunisian politics today.

Reading the chapters of *A Fledgling Democracy* in parallel with the ongoing process of dismantling democratization in Tunisia reminds us of how complicated and complex the process was during the first decade after the uprising, politically and individually, on the macro and micro levels. This is the strength of the book. No single area is the deciding factor behind the success, cost, and fall of the democratization process. This makes Tunisia a case in which scholars and graduate students in political science, history, international relations, sociology, and anthropology are interested. However, for newcomers, this book is at times too difficult to disentangle the complexities of the provided material. For the experts in the field, it would have been valuable had the authors provided more in-depth theoretical discussions as to how the case of Tunisia contributes to our broader understanding of democratization. The book itself, nevertheless, reflects the freedom of research, fieldwork, and expression, which are some of the positive consequences of the uprising. Tunisian scholars and researchers have also benefited from these freedoms and produced excellent work. In future studies and publications, it would be great to see more collaboration among Tunisian and foreign scholars.

**Note**