

## **From Exceptionalism to Singularity: The Maghrebi Experience in Contemporary Perspective**

Today will be a deliberative day of debate, so I will not burden you with excessive academic discussion. Above all, I would like to welcome you all here to this workshop, which represents the culmination of a rich intellectual journey. That journey began in 2015, when Professor Stephen King, Professor Abdeslam Maghraoui, and other interlocutors began to organize a conference to explore the contemporary politics of North Africa.

The resulting endeavor in April 2016 brought together an impressive circle of scholars in a packed workshop to engage the Maghreb's social, economic, and political currents. The contributors to this project have become now the authors of varied chapters in this newly published volume, which we are all happy to see come to fruition. At the same time, I am intimidated by the knowledge in this room. Many of you know the area's empirical nuances and theoretical contours better than me. So, with that in mind, let me present just a single idea as a reflection upon our discussions. I present that idea as not an academic technician but a Moroccan private citizen who, from a unique vantage point as scholar and witness, has watched this region evolve over the decades.

There has long been an idea lurking in political discourse within the Arab world, and even within academic circles, about Maghreb exceptionalism. By "exceptionalism," I mean the notion that the North African states do not follow the general pattern of the Middle East, or of other modernizing countries. Instead, the Maghreb countries evolve to their own pace due to their cultural specificity.

In the past, the argument for Maghreb exceptionalism has been leveraged by various actors in the service of anti-democratic projects. France invoked this belief as a justification for colonial domination. It would again exploit it in consequent decades by insisting that it was stability and order, not political transformation, that was craved by the societies of North Africa. Let us not forget the quintessential declaration of former French President Jacques Chirac, who a decade before the Arab Spring proclaimed that Tunisians wanted bread and food, not freedom and human rights. Such a statement came from the president of the birthplace for enlightenment.

Ironically, many analysts reacted to Tunisian democratization by claiming that it was the country's exceptionally tolerant and liberal character that preordained the Jasmine Revolution. It seems exceptionalism never dies. Likewise, during and after the Arab Spring, even as Tunisia underwent its revolutionary changes, the Moroccan and Algerian regimes insisted that they remained unique in their inherent resilience and durability in the face of regional turmoil. The Algerian version of exceptionalism has entailed that a centrally planned economy, geopolitically neutral stance, and espoused Third Worldism borne out of revolutionary origins make the country an unlikely candidate for revolutionary turmoil.

Exceptionalism in Morocco has rested upon the persistence of monarchism. The royal regime is framed as an essential, mysterious, and even Orientalist panacea to the needs of Moroccan society, which makes the country resistant to change. As another example, observers have sometimes suggested that Islam and Islamism in North Africa are exceptional in its moderate character and historical practice.

This broader notion of a Maghrebi exceptionalism may also partly stem from post-colonial discourse, which deeply permeated how generations of Westerners would sympathize with the struggles of the Arab world. It was in turn instrumentalized by certain French elites and their autocratic counterparts in the Maghreb. Yet now, nearly a decade after the Arab Spring and as we see the latest wave of political changes occurring in Algeria, it has become clear that Maghreb exceptionalism is an idea that needs recalibration.

What I propose is that we see North Africa not as exceptional but **singular**. There is a Maghrebi singularity we can observe today, one defined not by its insularity from other Arab events or immutable traits, but rather by the way in which structural forces combine and recombine in a dynamic way. Indeed, the Maghreb is a microcosm of the Arab world. Herein lays its singularity.

In the North African states alone, we can capture the dramatic cross-case variations that typify wider regional trends. We see both monarchism versus republicanism, democracy versus authoritarianism, centralized political order versus collapsing states, secularism versus Islamism, and oil rentierism versus resource-poor development. The list goes on: within this one sub-region, we have extraordinary diversity. Perhaps the only commonality shared by the Maghreb states is language: everyone else in the Arab world agrees that our different national dialects are equally unintelligible!

There is much to unpack here at the nexus of Maghrebi singularity. I would like to focus on just one aspect, namely the possibilities of democratic change at the macroanalytic level. Let me consider a subset of the Maghreb, namely Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, which I know intimately. In Tunisia, as we know, there is an electoral democracy that is in the process of consolidating as it struggles to institutionalize the rule of law and horizontal accountability. Its democratization in 2011 was never supposed to happen, given the repeated claims of Maghrebi or Tunisian exceptionalism used by French elites in its support for Ben 'Ali.

Much like the Third Wave of Democracy, Tunisian democracy was conceived through pacts between competing political actors. In this case, those competing actors were Islamists and secularists. Divided by ideological discord yet unable to conquer one another, Tunisia's Islamist and non-Islamist parties cooperated through coalitional governance to lay the groundwork for its democratic transition, including elections and constitutionalism. This path was neither easy nor perfect. Islamist-secularist bargains were fraught with tensions, and nearly broke down several times. Moreover, economic struggles, transitional justice issues, and corruption have burdened the Tunisian state.

Still, Tunisia may well reveal that the most advantageous mode of political transition in the Middle East is pacted democracy. As such, it may be intellectually beneficial to re-engage the comparative study of pacting and pacted transitions. Tunisia's gains have also produced an extraordinary fact unmentioned in the Arab media. When Tunis hosted the 30th Arab League summit last month, it marked the first time the Arab League had ever met in a functional Arab democracy.

Algeria, today, presents a different set of dynamics. As we see from events still unfolding, Algerians have been rebelling against two political constraints for years. The first is the ghost of the 1990s civil war, and the long chilling effect its legacy had on popular mobilization and political pluralism. In many ways, the uprising today shows the country is "catching up" to Morocco and Tunisia in terms of having its Arab Spring. More deeply, it is catching up to its own past by picking up where it left off in 1988. The second constraint is the militarized authoritarianism that has defined Algeria since its independence, one where the armed forces ruled behind a façade of civilian power. The Bouteflika era was a modest reconfiguration, as former President Bouteflika carved out a small realm of executive autonomy by drawing upon new business elites and shuffling the security services.

In rejecting Bouteflika and the wider autocratic system, Algerians are also rejecting the three forms of escapism that long shaped politics. These were emigration to Europe, the turn towards Islamism, or disconnecting altogether and living on the margins. Algerians term those who did the latter as *hittistes*, meaning those who lean upon the wall. What we see today is the reversal of the *hittiste* trend, when in the past many citizens sought to exit political trauma through existential disengagement.

This political moment marks Bouteflika's downfall today but also the military's return. It is a transition, but not a necessarily democratic one, as protesters continue to push against the state. In response, the Algerian military is trying to learn from its arch-nemesis, the Moroccan *makhzen*. It is mirroring the *makhzen*. Facing popular contestation, its reaction will be to recycle the system in order to perpetuate it with a new civilian façade.

This brings us to Morocco, where the *makhzen* is observing events in Algeria with apprehension. If the Algerian uprising results in genuine political transformation, Morocco will find itself in an awkward position, as it will be alone clinging on to the older order. Morocco's politics exudes a different stereotype of Maghrebi exceptionalism. Here, the monarchy and its institutions have been justified as pillars of Moroccan order, which as a result is impervious to revolutionary currents and democratic demands.

This, as we know, is misleading. Morocco experienced wide-scale rioting in the 1960s, two military coups that nearly deposed the monarchy, political mobilization in the 1980s and 1990s, and during the Arab Spring a new wave of grassroots protest. More recently, as society has been atomized, uprisings have become more localized. The Rif movement represents the latest example, as vibrant protests there since 2016 reflect political anger, regional marginalization, and grassroots demands for dignity.

On the one hand, the Moroccan state retains familiar tools of retaining power. Against political parties, it has long engaged in political co-optation or else legal marginalization. Meanwhile, against Moroccan civil society, which has become the true vocal source for political change, the state has become more intolerant. While it has still not espoused a purely counterrevolutionary mentality like its Gulf monarchical counterparts, the regime has become more rigid and stiff in its repressive attitudes towards civic dissent. It has also deployed a new tool within its repertoire of control, namely leveraging the judiciary itself to silent its most ardent critics. The experience of many NGOs and social organizations, such as the plight of the Rif protest movement, the pressure imposed upon Freedom Now, and the dissolution of the cultural association Racines, shows that the Moroccan makhzen remains relentless in its suppression of dissenting opinions.

On the other hand, Moroccan society is as resilient as the state. Its youth generation as well as civil society remain able to continually recalibrate in response to pressures from above. They know that historically, monarchism is not impervious to change. How can we interpret these changing tides that undermine the notion of Moroccan exceptionalism? I would invoke the two most famous paradigms by which social scientists have viewed political order in the kingdom.

The first is John Waterbury's theory of elite segmentation, which emphasizes how institutionally creating networks of dependency, patronage, and clientelism has been a deliberate strategy by which the makhzen keeps the political class enchained. The second is Abdellah Hammoudi's theory of master and disciple, which suggests ancient cultural and religious foundations upon which Moroccans are expected to submit their obedience and authority to absolute power holders.

Today, both optics need tweaking. Economic underdevelopment has meant that there is precious little patronage left to fuel the segmentation of elites into networks of clientelistic dependency. Yet the political institutions created to enshrine cultural and religious obedience are unable to reproduce themselves under popular pressure. In sum, the rules of political engagement in Morocco are shifting.

These three vignettes of Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco show a common thread. Prior to the Arab Spring, they all had "Jacobin"-type states defined by a high degree of centralization authoritarianism. At the same time, they also allowed for very limited pluralism, which was exploited when necessary. Thus, these old survival strategies are no longer working. Indeed, an intelligent question might be not so much *if* large-scale political change occurs, but *when* and *how* as well as at *what cost* based upon the Tunisian and Algerian trends.

My sense, rooted in Maghrebi singularity and its representation of wider Arab politics, is that democratization may come if it is pacted. Democracy will be pushed from below, but ultimately must be shaped and institutionalized through compromise between competing actors. There are many competing groups and forces with claims to power in the Maghreb. Some have been historically suppressed, while others have remained in power

for decades. If there is a popular rupture, it will be up to these competitors to forge a mutual understanding in order to create a shared political order.

If we see such positive changes catalyzed in this way, perhaps in some years we will be talking about not Maghrebi exceptionalism, or Maghrebi singularity, but rather Maghrebi leadership for the Arab world in terms of its democratic character. And that is a reality worth studying.