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The State in North Africa: After the Arab Uprisings

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The State in North Africa: After the Arab Uprisings

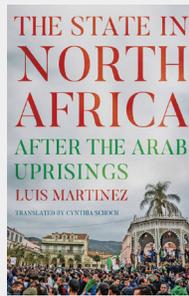
By Luis Martinez, translated by Cynthia Schoch

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The current structure of the relations between society and state in North Africa is a result of multiple factors that have been influencing the states of the region since before their independence. North African regimes had been able to maintain a certain ‘type’ of order in the region until the Arab uprisings when the post-colonial governments found themselves facing a new threat not only to their stability but also to their survival. In this context, from a long-term political-historical perspective, Luis Martinez, an experienced specialist on North Africa, presents a concise analysis of the region’s political development since the time of the uprisings, highlighting the essential factors that shape and challenge the North African states’ national cohesion by examining the policies that North African governments have implemented to maintain national unity and to survive an era that is considered ‘new’ and ‘profound.’ Martinez even goes one step further to analyze why and how the same policies are currently being revised.

The book consists of a total of eight chapters. The first chapter broadly explores the nation-building process in North African states since their independence. The social and political challenges tackled by the governments in this process are examined in the second chapter. Based on the first two chapters, Martinez examines the political developments in



the North African states: Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, and lastly Algeria in separate chapters. The seventh and eighth chapters investigate the post-Arab spring security framework in North Africa, starting with the role of jihadist groups, moving to the issue of migration flows to the EU, and the pressure that comes

with it. Martinez sheds light on the dilemma of governmental responses to civil society demands when addressing jihadi violence and explains how national cohesion is jeopardized by it. In the conclusion, the author underlines what should be done to rebuild a sense of belonging and loyalty in North Africa.

Throughout the book, the author emphasizes the fact that the post-colonial North African states’ design is an expression of the legacy of the colonial state. Libya, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia are bound by a common past: colonial oppression; these states faced a long struggle for independence, and national conscience is the common result of this struggle. Accordingly, Martinez asks a fundamental question: in the absence of colonialism, what can unite these different nation-states? More precisely, if the public good is not the priority of the ruling regimes, how are national loyalties guaranteed? From this starting question, the author examines national cohesion, which he considers an old issue that has risen again. One of his main arguments is that the

real problem lies within the structure of national identity, the thing that led to the failure of North African states in framing identities that can sustain social cohesion, political legitimacy, and secure borders. This problem was exacerbated by rapid population growth and high unemployment, which led jihadist groups to try to form a new national 'Islamic' identity. As a consequence, one of the main instruments that these states used to rebuild the essential ties of state belonging and reinforce border control is the fight against the jihadists. Martinez argues that the over-investment of governments in efforts to restore national cohesion and security has resulted in the latest problem—neglect of the state's economic and social structure.

In terms of the content of the book, there are strengths and limitations. To begin with the strengths, it is a coherently written book that expands the reader's understandings of the fragility of Maghreb regimes and the challenges they are facing today. What I found valuable is the way the author points out how the states of North Africa are learning from their history. For example, the demonstrations were successfully 'absorbed' by authorities in Algeria and Morocco due to the previous experience of both countries in the eighties. Moreover, underscoring the role of nation-building as the key preoccupation of Maghreb states is a great addition to the literature, as it is in fact what determined the survival of the states after the Arab revolts and explains, in a way, the democratic transition in Tunisia and the current civil war in Libya; Bourguiba's legacy is not the same as Qaddafi's.

Concerning the book's limitations, Martinez highlights the challenges posed by the fragile Maghreb regimes and their weak instruments in responding to their population's claims as

well as regional demands. He argues that most of these challenges and problems were already present when the countries gained independence. However, he gives less importance to the long-standing post-colonial governments' role in elite corruption, which is one of the main sources of the fundamental problems that Maghreb states are facing today. The elites' role in North Africa has shifted. For instance, before Algeria's independence, political, religious, and cultural elites there played great roles in building a culture of resistance against colonialism. But since the early stages of its independence, Algeria witnessed the birth of a new type of elites. The Algerian government allowed and even pushed the new elites to strengthen and manifest the hegemony of their power instead of using it to repair the damage that colonialism left behind. As a result, everything in Algeria belonged to the elites instead of the people, a situation that facilitated the corruption of the educational system and the economy by limiting development options. Martinez talks about how the state-building process in North Africa determined its chances of survival after the Arab uprisings. In Algeria, a careful examination of the phenomenon of failure that characterized the state-building process leads us to a fundamental observation: this process had to pass through a specific channel, which is the coexistence of and peaceful competition between the ruling authority and the rest of the elites in society. The failure of this channel is a central factor responsible for the bankruptcy of the legitimacy of the ruling regime, a bankruptcy that reached a dangerous level during the second half of the 1980s and which, after almost a decade of independence, reawakened the political consciousness of the people and led to their uprising: *al hirak*.¹ Today's 'citizen uprising' is changing the former colonial states politics, the future of the region is vague but

one thing is sure: North Africa has learned and still is learning from its past.

Overall, the book is a well-researched and very useful contribution to the debates about Arab politics after the uprisings. It could be of benefit and importance to academics, students, researchers, and anyone who would like to understand the Maghreb state's politi-

cal and social structure, both in the past and today.

Endnote

1. To better understand the concept of al Hirak, see, Ghazouane Arslane, "What Is Universal about the Algerian National 'Hirak'?" *Africa Is a Country*, (December 7, 2019), retrieved from <https://www.africainfo.com/2019/07/what-is-universal-about-the-algerian-national-hirak>.