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Consolidating pluralism under the terrorist threat: the Tunisian case and the Algerian experience

Dario Cristiani

Abstract   As Tunisia continues to move forward on the path of democratisation and pluralism, the problems it may still face remain significant. A comparative analysis of the (failed) Algerian attempt to democratise and the current process underway in Tunisia could shed light on what Tunisia needs to do to avoid a setback in its democratisation process.

Introduction

Tunisia is, in every way, the front-runner among the Arab Spring countries and the only country in which the Arab Spring has produced a real, democratic transformation. The country has moved from having an autocratic government to a more plural and open

D. Cristiani (✉)
Vesalius College, Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium
e-mail: dario.christiani@vub.ac.be

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system, in which elections are free and fair, and losers accept the results without contesting the legitimacy of the overall system. Despite these positive developments, Tunisia is now facing a number of old and new problems, from regional dualism to terrorism, and from the spread of radicalism to economic problems. These issues may undermine its path towards democratic and pluralistic consolidation. To understand what Tunisia must avoid to save its democratic achievements, it is worth looking at the experience of another country in the Maghreb region, where the opening up of the political system turned into a bloody civil war which has prevented the country from consolidating its democratic and pluralistic opening: Algeria.

Algeria and Tunisia are two very different countries in terms of demographic size, political and social systems, geopolitical orientations, colonial histories and economic structures. Nevertheless, analysing them comparatively can provide insights into how to safeguard the process of democratisation and move forward in pluralising the political and social system. It is also worth noting that in terms of democratisation and pluralism, Tunisia is currently more advanced in every way than Algeria was at the end of the 1980s. Still, Algeria's experience is a powerful reminder of the potential for crisis that democratic setbacks may embody.

Moreover, Algeria was the first Maghrebi country to experience the emergence of an internal terrorist threat as a result of the halted democratic process. This represented a systemic menace to its political and social system. As such, analysing its tortuous path to ending terrorism and the civil war, returning to normality and strengthening civilian rule over the military, and how it missed the chance to promote a deeper and more consistent democratic system after the riots of October 1988 and the first multi-party elections in its history, is helpful in analysing the challenges Tunisia is facing today. In particular, such an analysis can highlight what Tunisia must avoid and what it should take from that experience to strengthen the consolidation of its path towards pluralism and democracy.

The Algerian experience

When discussing the Arab Spring, many scholars have observed that Algeria remained immune from this wave of protests, despite the presence of a socio-economic situation that could be considered prone to triggering revolution. However, revolution did not happen for two main reasons: divisions between the various opposition groups in the country and the political use of economic tools to reward loyalty and reduce discontent (Cristiani 2011). However, it is also worth noting another critical factor that prevented Algeria from experiencing the Arab Spring: the country had already experienced something similar in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the political instability of that period triggered the eruption of the civil war, memories of which are still vivid in the political psychology of the country today. This was an influential factor that prevented Algeria from experiencing a new wave of destabilisation (Addi 2011). Nevertheless, that experience offers a number of potential lessons for Tunisia, and more for all countries

which are undergoing a process of pluralistic opening up and changes in their political structures.

At the end of the 1980s, Algeria experienced the first serious domestic political crisis in its post-independency era. The crisis placed significant pressure on the socialist rentier state built in the aftermath of independence by Ahmed Ben Bella and Houari Boumedienne[1] and which centred around oil, the National Liberation Front (Front de libération nationale, FLN) and the military. A decade of declining oil prices put this socialist–dirigist economic model under pressure and contributed to the progressive erosion of the legitimacy of the FLN. This dynamic was also accompanied by the rise of conservative, hard-line nationalists, who had grown stronger after quelling the Berber Spring in the early 1980s, and Islamist organisations, which were re-emerging after the marginalisation they had suffered prior to the 1980s (Le Sueur 2010, 30). The October riots in 1988 signalled the beginning of a new phase. The FLN's decision to resort to using the military to quell the revolts contributed to the end of the little legitimacy that it still enjoyed in the eyes of the Algerian citizens. This paved the way for the end of the FLN's hegemony in the political system. President Chadli Benjedid introduced a number of ground-breaking changes to the political system, terminating the identification of the state with the party. He also abandoned reference to the 'revolutionary socialist option', opening up the political system to multi-party politics[2] through elections which were won by the Islamist Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut, FIS) (Aghrout 2008, 32).

The FIS's political discourse was characterised by a number of controversies and ambiguities, particularly among those sections of the party closer to Ali Belhadj.[3] Nevertheless, the FIS's stance in the window of pluralist opportunity that opened up following Benjedid's changes was not anti-democratic and accepted de facto the rules of the democratic game and political pluralism, despite the military's attempts to provoke the FIS to make it appear undemocratic—a plot later known as the 'Nezzar plan'.[4]

While it is now impossible to know whether, once in power, the FIS would have halted the democratic process, what we do know is that the support for them in first the local and then the national elections prompted a response from the military, who suspended the democratic process, a decision that the FIS condemned but that did not prompt any calls to arms.

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[1] Ahmed Ben Bella was the first president of independent Algeria, deposed in a coup d'état by Houari Boumedienne in 1965. The latter would rule Algeria until his death in 1978.

[2] After winning local elections with a comfortable margin, and despite the attempts of the Algerian authorities to co-opt and contain its members, the FIS gained 47.3 % of the vote, worth 231 out of 430 seats in the first round of the national elections of 26 December 1991, with the FLN winning less than half of the FIS votes (23.4 %). As other, smaller Islamist parties won around 8.5 % of the vote, more than 50 % of the votes cast were for Islamist groups, which shows how widespread opposition was to the FLN.

[3] Ali Belhadj co-founded the FIS with Abassi Madani, and he was the most important figure among the radical/revolutionary group within the party.

[4] The plan was named after General Khaled Nezzar, who revealed its existence in his *Mémoires* [Memoirs] (Le Sueur 2010, 48–50).

In the following years, a number of developments radically changed the overall picture: the FIS's status as a legal political party was revoked by the Algerian authorities; its leadership—particularly the old guard that represented a buffer against radical groups—disbanded; and the party split into many smaller groups, including militant branches that grew increasingly strong and independent (Heristchi 2004, 117–18).

Ultimately, the military repression carried out by the Algerian state and the halting of the democratic process, combined with a number of international factors—for instance, the Western acquiescence towards the end of the Algerian democratic process and the Gulf War in 1991, which radicalised further Islamist groups around the world (Cavatorta 2009)—paved the way for the eruption of the Algerian civil war and the dominance of the military, particularly the Department of Intelligence and Security (Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité, DRS).[5] The first years of the civil war were the most violent, with the army adopting an eradication stance, aimed at wiping out radical Islamist groups. As the civil war deepened, the political approaches to how to handle this threat became less unified, signalled by the emergence of a dialectic between the so-called *éradicateurs* (eradicators) and *dialoguistes* (dialoguers), the two sides in an unending political debate that would characterise Algerian politics in the years to follow. The *dialoguistes* would later get the upper hand, particularly once Abdelaziz Bouteflika rose to power. President Bouteflika promoted a policy of reconciliation with different parts of the Algerian Islamist world (Le Sueur 2010, 90–5). He also brought the military back under civilian control, through a policy that experienced significant resistance within Algeria but culminated in the disbanding of the DRS in 2016 (Nield 2016). However, Bouteflika failed to promote real democratisation in Algeria.

The Arab Spring and Tunisia: a new beginning

Tunisia was the birthplace of the Arab Spring[6] and, as noted at the start of this article, is also the sole successful story of the wave of revolutionary change that was too quickly named, and as it is still known by some, the 'fourth wave of democratisation' (Abushouk 2016; Howard and Hussain 2013; Grand 2011). This revolutionary wave affected almost all the countries of the Middle East and North Africa but the outcomes have been very diverse, even among those countries that have experienced an actual regime change (Anderson 2011).

Despite these achievements, the Tunisian democratic transition and the path towards consolidation remain fragile (Murphy 2016, 239). Breakdowns and potential reverse

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[5] As Algeria fell into civil war, the DRS became one of the most important players in the Algerian political landscape. It was run by Mohamed Mediène, also known as 'Toufik', from 1990 to 2015, and for many years represented the real decision-making authority in Algeria.

[6] On 17 December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a street fruit seller who was also a young university graduate unable to find another job, set himself on fire to protest about police harassment and unemployment in Sidi Bouzid. This extreme act of protest, which led to his death, unleashed riots that later spread across Tunisia, reaching Tunis and triggering a mass protest movement which forced President Ben Ali to step down.

waves continue to represent a threat. The country's structural economic and regional dualism (Bousnina 2012), one of the key triggers of the revolution in 2011, has not yet been addressed successfully. In addition the wave of protests that hit the Kasserine region and the surrounding areas in the south in January 2016 was a warning of the potential for crisis that still exists in significant portions of the Tunisian territory.

In addition, since 2015 the country has experienced a growing terrorist threat,[7] which has put pressure on the Tunisian political system and its economy, as tourism has been hit hard, worsening an already bleak economic picture. These attacks have shed light on the existence of radical Islamism in Tunisia, a fact that the post-Arab Spring Tunisian authorities had known about but were reluctant to address openly. In 2014 Tunisian fighters made up the single biggest national group among Islamic State (IS) foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq—as many as 3000 as of the end of 2014—and Tunisian press reports at that time suggested that about 9000 Tunisians were ready to join IS (Cristiani 2014). Under increasing armed pressure from the international coalition, IS started to send some of these militants to Libya. The presence of IS militants in Libya increased the risks for Tunisia significantly, and indeed a rise in the number of terrorist attacks on Tunisian soil was one of the outcomes of this dynamic. Thus, the picture for Tunisia in the first five years after the Arab Spring has been mixed. On the one hand, the country has made a genuine attempt to pluralise and democratise its institutions, and all the political actors in the system have managed to keep the political struggle, with some exceptions, within the limits of the democratic game and dialectics. In this context, the election of the Islamic Ennahda Party in 2011 and its defeat in 2014—with acceptance of the ballot's results and the party's continuous evolution as a democratic actor (Ghannouchi 2016)—and the resilience of Tunisian institutions despite the terrorist threat are proof that this process is robust. On the other hand, there is the menace of terrorism: a radical and revolutionary Islamist culture, with many youngsters, particularly from the south, willing to join IS; unaddressed regional dualism and economic problems; and the persistent temptation from a number of secularist actors to exclude Islamist parties *tout court* from the political system continue to pose serious threats to the wider stability of the Tunisian path to consolidation.

Avoiding marginalisation

To start with, the Algerian experience suggests that political and social marginalisation often causes a reaction. This was the case for many social groups in Algeria at the time of the one-party system, and was even more the case when those political groups were barred from power after they had won elections. Such a reaction can provoke a violent downward spiral which may contribute to securitising and militarising the confrontation. Indeed, at that time FIS was not obviously a radical organisation, and the militarisation

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[7] In 2015, Tunisia suffered three major terrorist attacks: the Bardo attack in March, the Sousse attack in June, and lastly, the suicide bombing of a presidential guard bus in Tunis, in the area of Lac I, at the end of November.

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of the confrontation contributed to triggering a fully fledged civil war that lasted for almost 10 years. For Tunisia, it is even more important to avoid the militarisation of this issue, as, in contrast to Algeria, the government lacks the military strength and security capabilities to fight such a war. This does not mean that terrorism and radicalism should be tackled only with non-military tools: the Tunisian authorities must also address this issue from that point of view, but always within the limits of the rule of law and proportionality, and by accompanying any such actions with social and economic measures to address the grievances that nurture radicalism.

Avoiding marginalisation does not mean accepting and including all political groups or ideologies. It only implies rejection of the impulse, still present in certain *ultra-secularist* sections of Tunisian society—particularly in Tunis—to consider all Islamist groups as the same. This goes hand in hand with avoiding losing the support of and alienating the conservative middle class. While it is true that youngsters often fuel radicalism, their beliefs can be somewhat moderated by the presence of groups of older people who are political and social protagonists. The latter represent cultural and social buffers against the spread of radicalism, particularly in those societies and local communities in which family links still matter. The Algerian response to the rise of Islamist political parties alienated most traditional constituencies and, because some parties were also considered enemies by the more radical groups who fought in the civil war, they lost their capacity to influence the silent mass of young people targeted by radical Islamist propaganda.

Global jihad, the radicalisation of discontent and the erosion of traditional social buffers

Again referring to the Algerian experience, there is another important point to underline. It is not a coincidence that the emergence of the Algerian crisis that paved the way to civil war happened at the end of the 1980s, a decade in which the global, radical Islamist movement changed considerably. This decade was central to the radicalisation and, to some degree, the emergence of the more revolutionary character of these groups. Beginning in the early 1990s the global Salafi–Wahhabi movement, from which first Al-Qaeda and later IS emerged, morphed into a revolutionary movement and turned its sights against the Saudi regime that had originally started to promote this ideology in the 1970s in a politically passive form (Gause III 2016, 119). As the jihadist movement expanded globally in the 1980s, it enabled the spread of this ideology to areas that were historically far from the centre of its dissemination, particularly following the return of the so-called Arab Afghans to their home countries from Afghanistan. Having spread, this revolutionary version of Salafism represented a potent tool for destabilisation in many areas. This was also the case in those countries in which central governments were known to take a rather robust approach to Islamism, such as Tunisia under Ben Ali. This dynamic thus created a local environment conducive to the radicalisation of many groups, particularly in rural and suburban areas, through the spread of an ideology that was mostly alien to the local cultural environment. At the same time, the lack

of opportunities for other, less radical Islamist organisations prevented the erection of a 'natural fence' against the spread of this ideology.

From this point of view, another lesson that Tunisia can draw from the Algerian experience is that rediscovering and strengthening local, traditional identities can create a cultural barrier against the spread of alien, radical ideologies, and that the presence of Islamist political players can also stop militant proselytism. Thus, there is the risk that the rising wave of terrorism that has hit Tunisia could tempt certain secular groups to use it as a tool in rhetoric against all Islamist players. It is always important to differentiate, and the FIS experience is telling from this point of view, as disbanding moderate Islamist organisations could pave the way for the emergence of more radical groups.

In this respect, the need to promote more efficient policies to reduce the regional dualism that still characterises Tunisia must also be considered: marginalisation was crucial in prompting the October riots in Algeria in 1988. It was also one of the reasons why radicalism emerged in rural Tunisia, and regional dualism was one of the key triggers of the Arab Spring, which did indeed start in the Tunisian interior's underdeveloped areas. Addressing this dualism would also serve the aim of removing the structural conditions that underlie the spread of radicalism, which is ultimately a key risk for the future of Tunisian democracy.

Last, but not least, the Algerian experience shows that without reconciliation, it is impossible to move forward. This option should be considered in a cautious manner, for instance when dealing with groups and militants who persist in refusing to accept pluralism and tolerance. But reconciliation should be used to welcome back into Tunisian society those people who show a genuine change and to demonstrate the inclusive nature of a pluralistic regime.

Conclusion

The Algerian experience during the 1990s shows that the emergence of radical Islamist terrorism can become a systemic threat which has the potential to put the structure of the state at risk and to inflict political, social and psychological wounds that are particularly complicated, if not impossible, to heal. Although the countries of the Maghreb are all very different, despite being part of the same geographical area, it is still possible to draw certain comparisons and to isolate factors and dynamics that represent either a model of inspiration or mistakes to avoid. Tunisia was the country that started this wave of change, and so far it is the only one which has moved forward, despite a number of problems. The problems Algeria experienced after the opening up of its authoritarian and single-party system—that is, the subsequent emergence of radical Islamist movements and the eruption of terrorism—help us understand the challenges that, if not met, can undermine and derail the path towards the consolidation of pluralism, and thus democracy, in Tunisia.

The disruption of the democratic and pluralist process in Algeria opened up the chasm of civil war. While Tunisia does not seem to be taking the same path, the risks of a reverse wave are still significant. The country must avoid making the same mistakes that halted the democratic process in Algeria and radicalised some of its domestic constituencies.

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Dario Cristiani *is assistant professor in international affairs and conflict studies at Vesalius College, Vrije Universiteit Brussels.*

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