

Oligarchic Transitions within the Tunisian Autocratic Authoritarian System and the Struggle for Democratic Transformation: Before and beyond the 2010 Jasmine Revolution

Authors : M. Moncef Khaddar

Abstract : This paper focuses mainly on a contextualized understanding of 'autocratic authoritarianism' in Tunisia without approaching its peculiarities in reference to the ideal type of capitalist-liberal democracy but rather analysing it as a Tunisian 'civilian dictatorship'. This is reminiscent, to some extent, of the French 'colonial authoritarianism' in parallel with the legacy of the traditional formal monarchic absolutism. The Tunisian autocratic political system is here construed as a state manufactured nationalist-populist authoritarianism associated with a de facto presidential single party, two successive autocratic presidents and their subservient autocratic elites who ruled with an iron fist the de-colonialized 'liberated nation' that came to be subjected to a large scale oppression and domination under the new Tunisian Republic. The diachronic survey of Tunisia's autocratic authoritarian system covers the early years of autocracy, under the first autocratic president Bourguiba, 1957-1987, as well as the different stages of its consolidation into a police-security state under the second autocratic president, Ben Ali, 1987-2011. Comparing the policies of authoritarian regimes, within what is identified synchronically as a bi-cephalous autocratic system, entails an in-depth study of the two autocrats, who ruled Tunisia for more than half a century, as modern adaptable autocrats. This is further supported by an exploration of the ruling authoritarian autocratic elites who played a decisive role in shaping the undemocratic state-society relations, under the 1st and 2nd President, and left an indelible mark, structurally and ideologically, on Tunisian polity. Emphasis is also put on the members of the governmental and state-party institutions and apparatuses that kept circulating and recycling from one authoritarian regime to another, and from the first 'founding' autocrat to his putschist successor who consolidated authoritarian stability, political continuity and autocratic governance. The reconfiguration of Tunisian political life, in the post-autocratic era, since 2011 will be analysed. This will be scrutinized, especially in light of the unexpected return of many high-profile figures and old guards of the autocratic authoritarian apparatchiks. How and why were, these public figures, from an autocratic era, able to return in a supposedly post-revolutionary moment? Finally, while some continue to celebrate the putative exceptional success of 'democratic transition' in Tunisia, within a context of 'unfinished revolution', others remain perplexed in the face of a creeping 'oligarchic transition' to a 'hybrid regime', characterized rather by elites' reformist tradition than a bottom-up genuine democratic 'change'. This latter is far from answering the 2010 ordinary people's 'uprisings' and 'aspirations, for 'Dignity, Liberty and Social Justice'.

Keywords : authoritarianism, autocracy, democratization, democracy, populism, transition, Tunisia

Conference Title : ICPSRT 2020 : International Conference on Political Science and Regime Types

Conference Location : San Francisco, United States

Conference Dates : June 05-06, 2020