

Heterodox Economics Newsletter

TUNISIA: STABILITY AND REFORM IN THE MODERN MAGHREB, by Christopher Alexander, New York, NY: Routledge, 2010. 160 pages; ISBN: 978-0-415-48330-8.

Reviewed by Umeshi Rajeendra, Denison University

Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghreb was published just a few months before the so-called “Jasmine Revolution” was ignited in December 2010. However, it provides readers with excellent insight into Tunisia’s political, economic, and social development and its relationships with its fellow Arab and European neighbors from the mid-nineteenth century to the months prior to the uprisings. By digging deep into what makes Tunisia the country that it is, Christopher Alexander sheds light on why Tunisia was considered one of the region’s most stable and successful countries ruled by dictatorship. Contrary to popular belief, Alexander argues that the relationship between the stability and reform of Tunisia is ingrained in a unique political structure that is attached to a range of actors created through the authoritarianism of two of Tunisia’s former presidents, Bourguiba and Ben Ali. According to the author, both presidents consolidated power during different conditions and through different qualities of their authoritarian lifestyle that paved the way for Tunisia to be, or appear to be, a prominent stable and prosperous nation-state in the 21st century.

The book’s greatest strength lies in its comprehensive description of Tunisian history through five thematic topics. In chapter one, Alexander uncovers not only Tunisia’s political development in the colonial period and the events leading up to its independence from France in 1956, but also the rise of personal power through the dominance of one political party in Tunisia’s political, economic, and social life. The second chapter details the strategies of the two presidents in policy-making decisions and how it shaped Tunisian politics in the post-colonial period. Chapter three focuses on the economic development models employed by Tunisia that both lifted its economic status and masked the reality of the economic weaknesses of the country. The fourth chapter provides readers with the country’s most critical foreign relations: France, the US, the European Union, the Middle East, and most importantly, the Maghreb. Lastly, the final chapter takes core points of the above chapters to reflect on Tunisia’s future. The author discusses why Tunisia has remained an authoritarian country through the complex relationship between stability and reform before concluding.

Alexander’s greatest flaw is in the concluding chapter because of the nature of his book. The author states that “political change in Tunisia will not come about through some dramatic event that suddenly replaces the existing order with a new one. The stability-reform dialectic that has driven Tunisian politics for the past five decades will continue to do so. The central question is whether or not that dialectic [...] can be shaped [...] by more than one man and one party” (p. 123-124). In light of the Tunisian revolution and the wider Arab uprisings, we have witnessed how a dramatic event such as a revolution can bring about political and economic change through the power and will of the people. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that the Tunisian revolution is fairly young and its impact is yet to be fully experienced.

Heterodox Economics Newsletter

As a whole, Alexander's *Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghreb* provides valuable insight into Tunisia's history up to the December 2010 uprisings and its place in the international political and economic system. His book provides a detailed backdrop for heterodox economists and readers who are interested in the political economy of the Middle East and North Africa region and in analyzing the economic consequences of the Arab uprisings. The book is very accessible for undergraduate students and is a critical asset for anyone working on alternative economic policy agenda for Tunisia.