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At the end of 2010, a fruit vendor in Tunisia named Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated in protest over restrictions placed on him regarding the selling of his fruit and as an expression of frustration over the injustices and corruption experienced under the government of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. This incident is often identified as the spark that began a revolutionary tsunami known as *al-sabwa*, the “Tunisian Uprising” or “Jasmine Revolution,” and later became more commonly known as the Arab Spring. *Al-sabwa* began a series of events, where the voices of discontent rose up throughout the region and toppled the government of Tunisia and several other countries, as well as led to multiple uprisings, demonstrations, and mini-rebellions in the Arab world. What is often misunderstood regarding this occurrence, is that the ripple of dissatisfaction had begun long before Bouazizi’s self-immolation. Rather, his actions were the proverbial “straw that broke the camel’s back” leading to mass protests, which eventually resulted in the overthrow of the U.S.-backed authoritarian regime of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.



Though much has been written about the Tunisian uprising, *Educational Transitions in Post-Revolutionary Spaces: Islam, Security and Social Movements in Tunisia* offers unique and thought-provoking insights. Authors Tavis D. Jules and Teresa Barton use a comparative historical framework to examine the role of education in the events that led to *al-sabwa* and beyond.

As a professor of cultural and educational policy and international higher education at Loyola University, Tavis Jules spent five years in Tunisia after *al-sabwa*. In April 2019, Teresa Barton completed her Ph.D. in education policy studies and international higher education from Loyola University. In this book, they approach the topic of *al-sabwa* using a transitology¹ vertical case study detailing colonial/post-colonial periods, the pre-*al-sabwa* and post-*al-sabwa* periods, all within the contextual dynamics of a Tunisian historical narrative. This approach contrasts with narratives portrayed by Western media, which can often be misleading. For example, the city of Sidi Bou Zid had a 30% unemployment rate, a significant trigger for the larger uprising. However, the city is often “dismissed as a backwater town,” implying it was of little consequence (p. 11). This, Barton points out, is an inaccurate depiction.

The book is an interesting read for the general public as well as academics, especially educational and political scholars. Readers will find themselves immersed within Tunisia’s complex and evolving educational history under various regimes, beginning with the French colonists (from 1881-1956), followed by the authoritarian regime of Habib Ben Ali Bourguiba (from 1957-1987) and President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s (from 1987-2011). This history also contains the conditions and developments that brought an end to those regimes. The authors conclude with the current post *al-sabwa* period, which is facing its

own set of challenges as a fertile recruiting ground for Islamic militants.

To fully appreciate the significance of this book and the history being presented, it is helpful to understand how education and schooling evolved within each of the three time periods. The Tunisian education system transitioned through centralization and decentralization, eventually settling into a “centralized education bureaucracy that still exists” (p. 51). Education policies related to these transitions combined with underlying social processes to create a “broader context of external change” (p. 7).

The book consists of eight chapters. The authors begin with a broad summary of the events which led to the removal of Ben Ali (Chapter 1) and then offer theoretical insights on educational transitologies (Chapter 2). The remainder of the book presents a compelling story of progressive reforms within Tunisian education, portraying a country that at one point was a pioneer in education within the Arab world. Tunisia was the first to offer women rights in education, to provide limited free schooling and access to higher education, and to increase the number of schools to provide education to the masses.

The book moves seamlessly from one time period into the next, as the authors provide a detailed rationale explaining the purpose of increased educational accessibility within each of the pre-*al-sabwa* governments, as well as how that education ultimately led to transitions in power and leadership. The authors’ narrative outlines the role played by education in Arab assimilation as part of ongoing French domination. They clearly establish how the Franco-Arab curriculum was designed to meet the needs of the French gentility while preparing local workers for bureaucratic government jobs similar to those found within France (p. 51). The increasing

¹ Transitology is defined as the study of the process of change from one political regime to another.

numbers of educated Tunisian elites, combined with unfair compensation for local Tunisians and a steadily declining economy, led to the movement for independence under the authoritarian leadership of Bourguiba.

Providing further evidence of the role of education in another Tunisian government transition, the authors move into the post-colonial period and philosophy of “Bourguism,” which combined a policy of universal “Arabization” along with the program to transform Tunisia into a “Westward looking nation” (p. 59). Bourguiba’s socialist policies, including free education, were designed to benefit the national interests and to develop the skills of the Tunisian population. However, the authors paint a vivid picture of the shortcomings of this period, which led to an excess of workers vying for limited positions in the job market. Ultimately this resulted in general strikes involving students from secondary schools and universities, leading to a bloodless coup in 1987 by Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

The book details Ben Ali’s regime, as he sought to “promote his image in the West as a democratic reformer” (p. 75) by proposing and adapting educational policies to meet the needs of Tunisia. The authors describe how his government encouraged foreign investment in the country as a means to expand both literacy and vocational programs, while cracking down on growing Islamic militancy, real and perceived (p. 74). The masses were promised free-market capitalism; the reality was that the free market was available only to his family and cronies. This led to ongoing unemployment among the educated masses, resulting in an economic decline, growing frustrations, and poor living conditions. In contrast, Ben Ali and his family continued to enjoy the fruits of privatization. Though he attempted to conceal the excesses of his and his family’s lifestyle, in the age of social media, the people of Tunisia had a vivid picture of a leader who was willing to put the country’s best interests behind his own. These

conditions along with social media, an educated, unemployed public, and the self-immolation of Bouazizi, combined and resulted in the overthrow of the Ben Ali regime.

The authors highlight the short-sightedness of Tunisia’s governing bodies and the disconnect between having an educated population without an economy to support them. The chapters paint a vivid picture of the ongoing failure by Tunisia’s leaders to recognize how decades of unemployment, declines in world economy, growing Islamic factions, and gross leadership excesses converged to create the perfect storm for educated masses to form a grassroots movement that used social media to overthrow Ben Ali and his regime. The irony, that a population who had found their educational voice through government established schools and then turned on that same government in protest, is not lost on the reader.

Jules and Barton continue Tunisia’s *post al-sabwa* educational story through a chapter dedicated to Tunisia’s educational and economic landscape. The masses, who had high hopes for a more prosperous Tunisia after the revolution were instead faced with a dark void left by previous governments. Multiple factions, including the terrorist organization Daesh, battled for the loyalties of the educated Tunisian population. This particular chapter was exceptionally enlightening as it highlighted the advantages that a well-educated, yet disillusioned and discontented Tunisian population felt they could receive by joining the rogue organization. The authors explain how disenfranchised youth were tempted to join Daesh and other fringe terror groups with promises of employment, a consistent and stable economy, and a prosperous standard of living, all which appeared unavailable in post *al-sabwa* Tunisia. This reader could almost empathize with young Tunisians who were

willing to join these terrorist organizations in return for a better standard of living.

Readers of this volume will be immersed in Tunisian education history, but they may be confused by the title, which is somewhat misleading. With terms like Islam, security, and social movements in the title, readers may think that the book addresses the role of religion and its connection to security and social movement. Though security concerns and social movements among the educated population throughout the different eras are discussed, the authors fail to address thoroughly the impact of Islam on the Tunisian education system. This oversight cannot be ignored since several policies were established and implemented during the transitions that were based on religious interpretations, such as the establishment of Muslim schools, or Madrasas, female educational opportunities, and the fundamental religious views of Daesh.

This book offers a unique perspective on the role of education in Tunisian governmental transitions. However, the authors could have created a more compelling narrative by including some interviews gathered during the post *al-sabma* years, while Tavis Jules spent in Tunisia. Those personal

stories would have helped the reader conceptualize the external challenges that raged throughout Tunisia with the everyday internal struggles of the average Tunisian. The inclusion of first-hand experiences may have allowed for a faster-paced read, as well as a deeper level of insight, humanizing the Tunisian experience.

Overall, this book is a must-read for anyone who is interested in examining the history of Tunisian education, or those who are interested in transitions within the Arab world. By linking education to recurring political events, the authors demonstrate the impact of local Tunisian educational transitions on global outcomes. Both educators and political scientists are forced to acknowledge the effects of colonization and the establishment of puppet governments by the West. This path was riddled with complexities and brutal regimes that often lead to instability, such as the formation of Daesh, and harsh consequences for the local population. In the end, this narrative is a fierce reminder of how noble concepts such as “an educated population” and “democracy for all” can rapidly spiral into darkness and disenchantment when placed in misguided hands.

About the Reviewer


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