

The Theory of Democratization in Tunisia: Linkage between Authoritarian Regime and Twin Tolerations

Takuro Mure

The widely known uprising, referred to as the “Arab Spring,” which occurred in Middle Eastern and North African countries immediately after 2010, enveloped many countries, except Tunisia, in civil war or political turmoil. Consequently, Tunisia was the only country that achieved democratization after the Arab Spring. Right after the Jasmine Revolution, the distinctive situation observed in Tunisia to date is a continued political coalition between the secularist and Islamist party. Previous researchers stated that a comprehensive political arena is essential for democracy, and the current political arena in Tunisia is “comprehensive” or “inclusive.” To this point, Alfred Stepan found that “twin tolerations” between religion and secularism is essential for democracy. Hence, the research problem here to address questions such as why Tunisia alone could be democratized among the Arab countries, and how did the secularist and Islamist parties cooperate in the same political arena. In order to examine the problem, this article focuses on Tunisian history, especially the 1990s, when the country faced the highest level of authoritarianism. After the first Islamist party participated in the election in 1989, Ben Ali recognized them as his rivals due to the large number of votes for the Islamists. While repressing the Islamists, he improved women’s political and social rights by changing some laws and establishing the Ministry of Women Affairs in 1992; to demonstrate his “freedom” policies to the Western countries, he permitted ATFD (L’Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates) in 1989. As women's rights policies were implemented during that period, which is the base of “twin tolerations,” there was vote balance between the secularists and Islamists. A high number of female voters and candidates, with increased Islamist tolerance towards women’s rights, led to the current political and social situation in Tunisia. We conclude that, without Ben Ali intending to, the authoritarian policy of the time contributed to the current positive political outcome. Therefore, this article clarifies the correlation between Ben Ali’s authoritarian regime and the current democratization in Tunisia.