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** The surnames are listed in alphabetical order.*

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BOOK REVIEW

Elizabeth R. Nugent

After Repression: How Polarization Derails Democratic Transition

(Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020, ISBN: 978-0-691-20305-8, 256 pp., \$29.95)

Since the waves of protests of 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa which became known as “Arab Spring”, many commentators and scholars have discussed the errors and shortcomings that accounted for near total failures of such unprecedented revolutionary movements sweeping across the Arab World. While no single consensus has been established among scholars on that end, there seems to be an agreement on the fact that the region as a whole has been left worse off than it was before the revolution, with divided societies along the lines of political, social, ethnic, and economic differences. In *After Repression: How Polarization Derails Democratic Transition*, Elizabeth Nugent puts forward a novel theory of polarization under autocratic regimes by comparing the cases of Egypt and Tunisia, two countries whose long-ruled authoritarian presidents had been dislodged by the Arab Spring protests. As noted by the author, the two countries were the first to stage the protests, resulting in swift resignations of long-ruled authoritarian leaders (i.e. Hosni Mubarak for thirty years in Egypt and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali for twenty three years in Tunisia). Yet, the transition culminated differently for both countries: while it has led to “democratic consolidation” in Tunisia, it has resulted in “reentrenched authoritarianism” in Egypt. As the title of the book suggests, it was (the high level of) polarization that derailed democratic transition in Egypt, while a lesser degree of polarization in Tunisia offered a window of cooperation and compromise. The book contains four sections (namely, Theoretical Perspectives; Repertoires of Repression; Repression, Identity, and Polarization; and After Authoritarianism), which are further broken down into 10 Chapters walking readers through every step in the suggested link between repression and polarization.

Nugent draws a causal link between state repression and political polarization through a two-stage process. The main argument asserts that first, the nature of repression of opposition shapes the political identities of opposition groups, and then “these identities in turn determine the level of political polarization at the moment of transition” (p.10). Drawing on social-psychological explanations, the author shows that political parties become less polarized when they suffer together under an authoritarian regime, due to their shared experiences of trauma and repression. By disaggregating authoritarian state repression into two types, namely “widespread” and “targeted”, Nugent argues that the former targets all opposition groups (as in Tunisia), thus diminishing in-group identification and decreasing polarization, while the latter singles out a specific group (as in the case of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt), hence strengthening in-group identification in the target group and increasing political polarization. As results of repeated interactions with the state’s repressive apparatus, opposition groups form their identities vis-à-vis out-groups. As such, widespread repression leads groups to identify themselves with the broader opposition group as common victims of repression and help “permeate previously constructed boundaries” (p.47) with more positive feelings of out-groups and willingness to converge central policy preferences. Targeted repression, on the other hand, increases in-group favouritism and exaggerates inter-group differences, bringing about more negative feelings of outgroups and more divergences on preferences.

This central argument is evidenced by the case of Tunisia and Egypt in the book. In both countries, Islamist parties, i.e. Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia, won 37 per cent of votes in the elections that followed the uprising, in a

political environment in which opposition parties were divided along the religious-secular cleavage. Common experiences of widespread repression among opposition groups under the Ben Ali regime (1987 through the 2010-2011 uprising) have led them to gather around the flagship of broader opposition over time. From her interviews with members of opposition parties, Nugent notes that “individuals spoke more about ‘the opposition’ as a cohesive entity” (p.137) about the later times of the Ben Ali regime. The author argues that repression shapes political identities not only through the psychological mechanism, but also through social and organizational ones. As such, widespread repression brought together the Tunisian opposition in shared spaces through forced exiles or imprisonments, facilitating their social interactions with each other which then resulted in increased positive feelings among opposition groups. This interaction among the opposition was commensurate with higher levels of convergence on parties’ preferences toward issues of high salience for political contestation, such as religion and politics, which was visible in parties’ changing manifestos and official statements, as well as formal agreements among opposition parties (p.150). The Egyptian opposition, on the other hand, has become highly polarized in attitudes and preferences over time due to targeted repression against the Muslim Brotherhood under the Mubarak regime. The Muslim Brotherhood has largely felt isolated, partially blaming other opposition groups for their silence against the repression and/or cooptation with the regime. This has resulted in increasing in-group identification while decreasing identification with other groups (p.177). Furthermore, unlike in Tunisia, opposition groups have had little to no shared experience of repression or shared social space for interaction. Therefore, the understanding of a broader “opposition” was absent in Egypt, which precluded opposition groups from cooperation and compromise in the post-uprising period. This was most evident in some opposition groups’ backing of the coup against the Muslim Brotherhood-led regime in 2013.

Nugent both challenges and contributes to the existing literature on repression and preference formation. First, Nugent refutes the common idea of repression as a strategic choice in the hands of political leaders, and argues that “repressive environments of independent authoritarian regimes are largely determined by previous state-building projects” (p.60). According to Nugent, it is path dependent; thus, the different coercive

institutions in Egypt and Tunisia are the legacies of management styles and motivations of British and French colonialism, respectively. Second, diverting from common explanations of preference formations based on structure, strategy, or ideology, Nugent focuses on micro-foundational cognitive processes, which are defined as “pathways through which individuals form and update preferences about politics” (p.37). Doing so, the author explains how repressive tools shape individuals’ preferences as well as affections not only through psychological, but also social and organizational mechanisms by use of targeted versus widespread repression.

The main strength of this book is the evidence which the author provides by combining both observational and experimental data and analyses. Nugent conducted field research in Egypt and Tunisia between 2012 and 2018, interviewing a representative sample of actors who constituted the democratic opposition before and after the Arab Spring uprisings. Furthermore, the findings from observational data on the case studies are further supported by results of an experiment in a controlled lab environment, which teases out the psychological causal mechanism underpinning the main theory.

In sum, Nugent’s *After Repression* presents a novel theory that links the nature of repression to political polarization in order to explain successes and failures of democratic transitions in Egypt and Tunisia, and beyond. The book offers suggestive evidence not only to explain or understand historical events, but also to warn political elites around the world of the galling process that derailed democratic transition in Egypt. It also speaks to a broader audience of scholars and students who are interested in the topics of repression, democratic transition, identity and preference formations, as well as authoritarian regimes.

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