

Book Review: The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia

Matthew Partridge reviews a book on the corruption and corporatism at work in Tunisia, and how the rhetoric of “modernisation” was used in some cases to justify policies that increased the power of the state.

The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia. Béatrice Hibou. [Polity](#). June 2011.

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Three years ago, a U.S. State Department official sent a dispiriting cable back to Washington D.C. entitled “[Corruption in Tunisia: What’s Yours is Mine](#)”. It began “according to Transparency International’s annual survey and Embassy contacts’ observations, corruption in Tunisia is getting worse. Whether it is cash, services, land, property, or yes, even your yacht, President Ben Ali’s family is rumoured to covet it and reportedly gets what it wants”. However, according to [Béatrice Hibou’s](#) *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia*, this institutionalised theft was not just a consequence of Ali’s dictatorship, but was one of the many means by which he used economic controls to ensure political dominance.

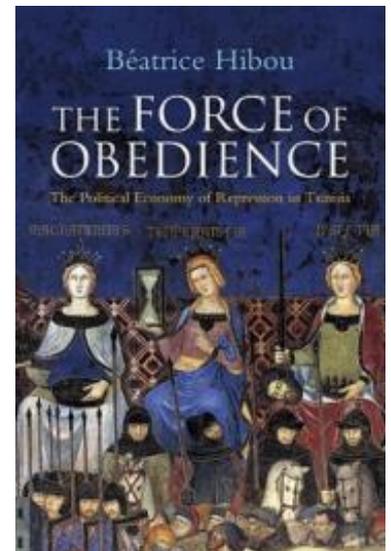
In particular, Hibou argues that this “corruption” did not just extend to the bribes and expropriation that other students of Tunisian politics have focused on, but also encompassed a wide-ranging series of discretionary interventions that enabled the regime to set up what she describes as a “policing state”. Under this system the rule of law was replaced with “a whole series of micro-decisions which foster the meshing of logics characteristic of Tunisian modes of government” and “make the control and individual surveillance of everyone possible”.

Roughly a fifth of *The Force of Obedience* is spent investigating banking, where this mixture of corporatism, paternalism and corruption was most apparent. For instance, debtor-friendly laws prevented the collection of bad debts and discouraged domestic investment. As a consequence, access to credit was determined by political connections as much as management competence, while financial institutions themselves depended on deposits from the myriad of state firms to survive. Hibou illustrates this process by citing the case of BIAT (Banque Internationale Arabe de Tunisie), which was severely punished after its founder criticized the economic policies of Ali’s regime.

Even the more traditional security mechanisms made extensive use of economic networks. Although Tunisia was heavily policed, the heavily regulated taxi sector was required to spy on passengers, as much to intimidate the population and spread “the idea that everything is being listened to, including the most anodyne discussions”, as to gather intelligence. Similarly, the punishment of dissidents focused on making them unemployable by confiscating their qualifications and putting them under de-facto house arrest. The overall aim of these measures was to “set a person apart, ostracize him and exclude him, subject him to trials and tribulations, and increase the sense of vanity associated with political communication”.

Although economic problems and pressure from international institutions would force Ben Ali to repeatedly pledge to institute economic reforms, Hibou argued that most of the controls persisted. Chapters 8 and 9 focus on how the changes were either left incomplete or deliberately subverted. One tactic was to “restructure” the enterprises immediately before their movement to the private sector by lumbering them with uneconomic contracts and obligations, leading to financial instability which forced them to continue their dependence on the Tunisian state. In other cases, their ownership was simply transferred to another public body with only a nominal amount of capital moved to the private sector.

Indeed, the rhetoric of “modernisation” was used in some cases to justify policies that increased the power of the state. From the middle of the 1990s the government gave large fiscal incentives to firms who were willing to commission research from private consultancies as to how they could adopt new processes and technologies. Although Hibou scrupulously acknowledges that the efforts initially boosted productivity, the business community quickly became disillusioned at the “proliferation of interventions” where “studies are



carried out because studies need to be carried out; enterprises find their hand forced to enter the program, to publicize it, to take part in delegations abroad and to vaunt the merits of Tunisia”.

Of course, Hibou has a preference for jargon and her style can be ponderous, though this may be due to the translation. The role that France played in enabling Ali could have been developed further, especially given that the Tunisian intelligence service were able to burglarise Hibou's offices. Instead of simply rewriting the introduction for the updated edition (the original was written in 2004/5 and published in 2006), it might have been worthwhile to include an additional chapter on why the system of repression finally collapsed.

However, these shortcomings do not prevent *The Force of Obedience* becoming a powerful reminder that, to paraphrase President Obama's recent speech, the future of the Arab world will depend on the interactions between street vendors and those in power.

Dr Matthew Partridge has recently completed a PhD in Economic History at the London School of Economics.