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STATES, PEASANTS AND TRIBES: COLONIALISM AND RURAL POLITICS IN TUNISIA AND LIBYA

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ABSTRACT

STATES, PEASANTS AND TRIBES:
COLONIALISM AND RURAL POLITICS
IN TUNISIA AND LIBYA

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Adopting the perspective that the state—the stable and continuous administration designed to control and to extract resources from a population—may be regarded as an independent variable which structures relations within society, this study explores the role of state-building and administrative development in determining the character of rural political organization in Tunisia and Libya. Tunisia’s rural population is a peasantry in which clientelism is the organizing principle of rural politics. Libya’s rural inhabitants are organized in kinship-based tribes which enjoy neither societal isolation nor economic autarky. Drawing on original research, this study seeks to explain the divergent paths of the two countries from the early nineteenth century, when the rural inhabitants of both societies were predominantly tribal, through examination of the continuity of precolonial and colonial state-building and the congruity of state-building and economic commercialization.
In both Tunisia and Libya, attempts to strengthen central administrations at the expense of the autonomy of the tribes of the hinterlands began well before colonial occupation. The seventy-five years which preceded the installation of the French in Tunisia in 1881 and the Italians in Libya in 1911 were characterized by attempts to establish standing armies, reforms of the tax and local administrative structures, and commercialization of agriculture. As elsewhere, state centralization and economic commercialization precipitated the development of broadly-based patron-client networks in the countryside. In Tunisia, these developments were fostered by European—notably French—penetration. In Libya, the impetus came from the Ottoman Imperial authorities in Istanbul.

Because the French had significant influence in Tunisia well before their occupation, they retained the precolonial government and administration. The Protectorate was designed to permit French supervision of the pre-existing bureaucracy and, under the French, administrative centralization was accelerated. The commercialization of the economy also proceeded as Tunisia's rural population was incorporated more completely into the world market economy. By the 1930s, when the mass-based Neo-Destour Party began organizing nationalist opposition to French rule, the autonomy of the hinterlands had been thoroughly eroded and the utility of tribal ties correspondingly undermined. The nationalist movement relied upon networks of clientelism.
to organize political support in the rural areas.

In Libya, the Italians had been unable to develop commercial and political ties within the precolonial bureaucracy. They therefore dismantled the existing administration after their occupation and imposed their own. The Ottoman administrative structures proved to be the organizational locus of resistance to the Italians, however, and the patron-client networks which had developed during the Ottoman period were evident well after the final Ottoman withdrawal in the wake of World War I. The local attempts to erect replacements for the Ottoman administration nonetheless failed in the face of Italian opposition, and by the time the Italians pacified the country in the 1930s, the hinterlands had regained de facto political autonomy. The regions subject to a regular, consistent, and centralized administration had dwindled and the rural attachment to kinship had revived. Unlike the political autonomy of the early nineteenth century, that of the mid-twentieth was neither formally recognized by the central government nor accompanied by a predominantly subsistence economy. The tribalism of rural Libya reflected a discontinuity between political and economic organization.

Thus, the divergent rural social and political structures of rural Tunisia and Libya have been determined by their differing experiences of state-building. The development of the Tunisian peasantry was a function of the consistency of administrative penetration and economic com-
mercinalization and the continuity of precolonial and coloni
cial bureaucratic development. Tribalism in Libya was a
consequence of an inconsistent history of state-building
and of discontinuity in administrative penetration and
economic commercialization.