

BULLETIN

No. 14 (231) • February 10, 2011 • © PISM

Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief), Agnieszka Kopeć (Executive Editor),
Łukasz Adamski, Beata Górka-Winter, Artur Gradziuk, Leszek Jesień,
Beata Wojna, Ernest Wyciszkievicz

France and Political Crisis in Tunisia

Dorota Liszczyk

Several weeks of violent anti-government demonstrations in Tunisia, which on 14 January led to the resignation of President Zin al-Abidin Ben Ali are an unprecedented event in the history of the state. France's highly restrained position on these incidents is consistent with previous French policy towards Tunisia. For more than two decades, support from Paris for the former president was intended to guarantee stability in Tunisia and protect the country against the development of Islamic fundamentalism within its territory. In the future, any assistance to Tunisia should be conditioned on Tunisian authorities' respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Background. The anti-government demonstrations, called the Jasmine Revolution, that began in Tunisia in December 2010 were an unprecedented public response—due to their scale and nature—to the regime of the former president. The economic situation in Tunisia, which had gradually deteriorated in recent years, undermined the foundation of the long-lasting Ben Ali government, which was based on a promise of economic prosperity that to some extent was meant to compensate citizens for far-reaching restrictions on civil liberties. The steady increase in the level of unemployment in Tunisia finally became particularly acute. Although officially about 14% of the population is unemployed, it is estimated that in the age group 18-29 that unemployment may be almost three times higher. Moreover, about 37% of university graduates are unemployed for an average of three and a half years after completing their educations. These data belie the thesis of a stable economic situation in Tunisia, whose economy in recent years has had a relatively high economic growth rate but which has been unable to generate enough jobs, especially for the multitude of unemployed graduates. Thus, the rapid development of education in Tunisia, which currently has one of the best higher-education systems in Africa, paradoxically became a negative factor for the stability of the regime. Restrictions on freedom of the press and freedom of political expression and association, a fight against political opponents as well as wide-ranging corruption and nepotism further discredited the former authorities, which in suppressing brutally the anti-government demonstrations eventually lost credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of Tunisia's citizens.

The authoritarian rule of President Ben Ali, seen as a factor for the internal stability of the state and a guarantee against the development of Islamic fundamentalism benefited from the traditional and almost unconditional support of French authorities. Successive French presidents, including François Mitterrand, Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy, have repeatedly pointed out not only the favourable conditions of life in Tunisia and expressed appreciation for its “economic miracle” and praise for President Ben Ali for choosing “the road of economic liberalization,” but they also have stressed the importance of great political change in Tunisia. Despite continual reports by human rights organizations about chronic human rights violations in Tunisia and the repressive nature of Ben Ali's regime, Franco-Tunisian relations have remained virtually free of discussion of these matters for more than two decades.

France's Position. The firmly restrained reaction of French authorities to the rapidly deteriorating situation in Tunisia was therefore a natural continuation of previous policy. Until President Ben Ali fled, the official position of France did not go beyond assurances it would carefully observe the events in Tunisia and calls to calm tensions and initiate a dialogue between the sides in conflict. France clearly emphasized that it was not France's responsibility to instruct Tunisian authorities on matters of economic or social affairs and avoided comment on the scale of the suppression of

the demonstrators or the increasingly disturbing information about the number of victims. The proposal made by French Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie to provide Tunisian authorities with assistance in the training of security forces met with a violent reaction. This initiative, interpreted as an offer of support for Tunisian authorities, was sharply criticized by the opposition who demanded consequences for Alliot-Marie, including her resignation. The French minister argued, however, that her intent was to protect the right to demonstrate and to help maintain order on the streets. The positive reaction of France on 13 January to Ben Ali's promises to increase civil liberties and improve the material situation, as well as a series of statements by leading personalities on the French political scene defending Ben Ali and stressing the positive results of his long-standing rule, made it evident that France consistently supported the regime until its fall.

Ben Ali's flight from the country on 14 January and, consequently, the radical modification of the political context in Tunisia have forced a change in the traditional position of France. In the first official statement on 14 January, the Elysée Palace reported only that it would "take note of constitutional transition in Tunisia" and called for an end to the fighting. In subsequent speeches, French authorities recognized the democratic aspirations underpinning the manifestations and announced support and assistance in organizing future elections in Tunisia as well as the continuation of the transition process already begun there.

Nearly all opposition groups strongly criticized France's passive position in relation to the events of the Jasmine Revolution. They accused French authorities of not only helplessness, inflexibility and even servility to the failing Tunisian regime, but also of losing credibility and bringing international disgrace on French diplomacy. Both the Socialist Party and the Greens published on 11 and 12 January, respectively, relevant messages that strongly condemned the bloody suppression of demonstrators and expressed solidarity with the citizens struggling in Tunisia. Defending their position, French authorities on one hand stressed that France's stance constituted an expression of the two main rules of its policy, i.e., non-interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state and the promotion of democracy and freedom, and on the other hand pointed out the difficulties of the shared history of France and Tunisia. As President Sarkozy emphasized at a press conference on 24 January, a former colonial power "is always devoid of any legitimacy to issue an opinion on the internal affairs of former colonies." However, French authorities acknowledged that they underestimated both the level of the determination of Tunisian citizens in the fight against Ben Ali's regime as well as the scale and nature of transformation in Tunisia, and were therefore surprised by the course of events.

Assessment and Prospects. It seems that given the alarming information about dozens of deaths during the anti-government demonstrations in Tunisia, the French policy of non-interference and restraint cannot be fully justified, especially since French diplomacy traditionally seeks to respond quickly to human rights violations in other parts of the world. The rapid transition from a policy of support for Ben Ali's police-state regime to a policy open to the democratic aspirations of the Tunisian people and the launch of (as announced by Sarkozy) "a new era in Franco-Tunisian relations" will require a total reorientation of French strategy toward Tunisia. This will be especially difficult as the success of the Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution remains far from settled. Moreover, even if successful, the process of democratic transformation in Tunisia will be challenging and lengthy, due to the absence of political debate in the country over the years and the current weakness of the opposition, which has neither political nor practical experience. The French promise of assistance in organizing the announced presidential and parliamentary elections in Tunisia poses a serious challenge for French diplomacy. There is no doubt that in order for Tunisia to improve living standards and reassure the radical mood of the population the country will still need economic assistance. Such assistance provided within the framework of bilateral cooperation, or within the wider context of the Union for the Mediterranean promoted by France in the European Union, should this time be closely linked to a requirement that Tunisian authorities respect human rights and fundamental freedoms.