



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org

F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223

Transcript

Tunisia One Year On: The Achievements and the Challenges

Merhézia Labidi Maiza

Deputy Speaker of the House, Tunisian Parliament

Chair: Jane Kinninmont

Senior Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

21 March 2012

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions, but the ultimate responsibility for accuracy lies with this document's author(s). The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

Jane Kinninmont:

We're delighted to be joined today by Merhézia Labidi, the deputy speaker of the Tunisian Parliament and a representative of the Ennahda Party, which was the party that gained the greatest amount of votes in last year's parliamentary election. Merhézia was elected last year to represent the Tunisians living in France. Previously she's been a teacher and a theologian and an interfaith leader working in France as well as in Tunisia. I greatly look forward to hearing what she has to say. We will start with a presentation by Merhézia and then we will have around half an hour for you guys to put your questions to her. So thank you very much, very glad to have you with us today.

Merhazia Labidi Maiza:

Okay. Well. *Assalamu alaykum wa rahmat Allah...*'aslam alayk', this is the way we greet you in Tunisia. It seems that I brought with me a great deal of sun, because I see it's a very nice sunny day in London, the same as I left it in Tunisia. First of all, I'll try to speak in English, but let's say Mediterranean English, so I hope that I manage to transfer to you clearly my thoughts.

Well, Tunisia one year after the revolution: what are our achievements and what are the challenges we are facing? I think this, of course I'll try to speak in about 20 or 30 minutes about it, but maybe it needs hours and hours and pages and pages to explain these achievements and especially the challenges. But I rely on your questions to help me unfold these topics and answer them in a better way.

One year after revolution is enough and it's too, also, too little to judge a revolution. This is why we can already say that our first achievement is that one year after our revolution, we have established legitimacy on the level of the [National] Founding Assembly, on the level of the presidency of the republic, and on the level of the government. I think this achievement is a considerable one. Indeed, in many other countries that have gone through revolutions like ours, and a way in which I followed as a member of Religions for Peace, as an interfaith leader, and especially in conflict transformation, the average is three or more years to establish a certain balance and also stability in a country that has gone through an upheaval like revolution.

And in these terms we can say that, again, we have a Tunisian exception. The Tunisian exception is that this revolution has of course resulted in many martyrs or victims, but the number was limited. We have had also a number of injured people, of people who have lost their richness, their property, their

belongings, their properties, but again the number of casualties is limited, and this is an achievement. And what is really very important is that after many years of dictatorship, many years of injustice, of oppression, we had a big number of Tunisian men and women from different parties, from different social belongings who have been victims of oppression, whose rights were taken unjustly, who were tortured. And I think it's only the grace of God, it's the blessing of God that we haven't witnessed, let's say, a reaction of revenge in Tunisia. Imagine that. Imagine that all these people wanted to take their revenge, to [take] revenge themselves on the people who tortured them.

And I know in some of our cities, for example like Mohammedia, in Kabbariya, around Tunis, in many cases former political prisoners lived in the same street as their former torturer, as the policeman who imprisoned them, as the policeman who was ordered to torture them. And there was no case in which Tunisian people, which were former political prisoners, people who were tortured and imprisoned unjustly, they reacted in trying to, let's say, render justice, by themselves. But people are still waiting [for] the justice to be done, to be administrated by the courts and not by themselves. This is, I think, a great achievement.

Another factor is that after the revolution, I was asked by a French friend who has a long, long experience as a civil servant, and he told me, he asked me, is Tunisia still having water at home? Yes. Do they still have electricity? You can, [do] they receive their salary at the end of the month? I said, yes. And you, in your markets you can still buy...? Yes. Oh, so your revolution is already a success. And this is very important. In Tunisia there was a revolution but there was a solid and firm and structured administration. This administration was a factor of stability and of continuity in our country. We will see that one of the challenges is how to get corruption out of this administration.

This is one of the challenges, but the first, I think, factor or the first achievement is that this administration secured the continuity of the state and the presence of the state in cities, in urban centres, and also in the countryside. This is very important for a country to continue to build again, because we cannot build on nothing. We cannot start from scratch. And if we compare with Libya, where there are no institutions, where [there is] no administration... rebuilding, reconstructing is quite a difficult mission and quite a difficult task. So in Tunisia I think one of our achievements is keeping this administration going on and working.

So, and of course, our greatest achievement is the elections, the 23 October elections, and this instance, or the authority, this independent institution that supervised, controlled, and organised the elections. I think this is really the greatest achievement because it helped to restore the trust, or the confidence, of Tunisians in politics. Because these people who have been, who has been prevented from his right to choose representatives and in transparency in – according to a very clear, a clear law, is a great achievement. This is what we needed, not only us as Tunisians but all these people who are undergoing revolutions, who have also gone through revolutions, because this is a main step. This is a main phase of the transition, the transition from a phase or a period where there is no voice to the people, the people have no voice, their voice has been confiscated, has been taken by those who govern them, who decide for them.

And so the first achievement, the greatest achievement is that the people say, we have a voice and our voice is listened to, and the people who are now representing us are those we have chosen. And the fact that the international community, that the old and well-established democracies recognize the result of these elections – I think this also is a great achievement, not only for Tunisia but for the international community too. Because what happened in some other experiences is that when the people have chosen their representative, the old democracies and international community said no, no, no, this is not a good choice. But in the case of Tunisia our choice was respected, and this is very important. This is, I think, an achievement for all democrats in the world.

Okay, the people have chosen, and it's due to the electoral law that it was based on proportionality, is all, let's say, the majority of the political colours in Tunisia were represented in this Founding Assembly. This is, I think, another achievement. And I really recognize and celebrate the wisdom of our people – he [sic] gave us a majority, but not a majority that allows us to govern by only one party. It's a relative majority, as if to send us a clear message: you have to work with others.

And here is the second achievement, is that in Tunisia we have politicians like Mr Marzouki, like Mr Ben Jafar, Mustapha Ben Jafar, like Mr Rachid Ghannouchi who have this courage to decide to create a coalition and to work together and to govern together. It's not easy every day. I follow their whole work, so some days I've said, oh my God, this coalition! But it is, I think, good for Tunisia. It's good for Tunisia because in building this coalition, in governing through this coalition, we are, as politicians we are learning every day how to negotiate, how to give something and to take, how to work not

only for the benefit of party, but for the benefit of Tunisia. And this is what we call the spirit of consensus. We are trying, also, to apply it to the working on the constitution. For me at the same time it's an achievement that in a country living a transitional phase, that there is a coalition that governs, there is a Founding Assembly that have a double mission – the mission of drafting the constitution and the mission of promulgating law, so legislative, like parliament, like ordinary parliament. And also to control the government. I think this is a very good example for other countries. It's a very good model. So I think we are compelled to success. We have to succeed. So it's at the same time an achievement but a challenge. If you follow the media and the newspapers in our country, you will read every day, is the coalition going to persist? It's not going to collapse? So there is great expectations on this coalition.

And personally I have learned a lot from working with Dr Mustapha Ben Jafar. Dr Mustapha Ben Jafar, the chair of our assembly, our founding assembly, is one of the most experienced politicians in Tunisia. He lived in the era of Bourguiba and he belonged to the party of Bourguiba. Then he was among the first young men to split and with Mr Mestiri, Ahmed Mestiri, to create another party, the MDS, the movement of democrats, the Socialist Democrat Movement. And then after that he created Ettakatol, the [Democratic] Forum for [Labour and] Liberties. So, I learn a lot from his experience and from his wisdom. But what is really wonderful is that he's said, he's saying the same thing: I'm learning a lot from you, madame, because of your sensitivity with women, as women, how you deal with conflicts, how you try to reconcile or draw closer opinions who are different sometimes, contradicting.

And this leads me to speak of another challenge, or another achievement, is the achievement of bringing women to the political field, not only as, let's say, *décor*, as you say in French, but as real actors. In our country, and since the independence, women have had a specific and privileged place in politics. But they were at the same time celebrated but exploited, their image was exploited. Okay, and for years and years the former dictator used women as pretext – you want me to give up? You want me to leave? But I'm protecting women's rights! But I'm protecting these women from extremism, from – okay, now we Tunisian women, whatever is our ideology, political choice, social roots, et cetera, our destiny is in our hands. And I think one of the achievements of this revolution is bringing women on the forefront of the political battle. What is really, for me, wonderful is that the greatest number of civil society organizations that have now been active, organizing meetings,

seminars, symposiums, training sessions about rights, liberties, women's status, the code of personal status in Tunisia, are women.

Every week, sometimes every day, I am invited to meetings and in all very high, let's say, social areas, and in popular areas. I was really, let's say, surprised, even bewildered, to be invited by women from Hayy Ihlal. Hayy Ihlal is one of the poorest areas in Tunis, around Tunis. This area was invisible during the dictatorship. It was invisible, nobody can be seen or visible from this area. The youth told me they were not even allowed to be in the Avenue of Bourguiba because when they were controlled with, oh, you're from Hayy Ihlal? Go to your area. And so I was invited last Friday by a group of women of this area, and I was expecting them to ask me about employment, poverty, healthcare – and they did. But women asked about the constitution. 'But what is our place in the constitution? Our rights, are they going to be saved in this constitution?' And they asked me lots of questions about their status, about their rights. And for me, this is an achievement, is that this revolution gave back to the Tunisian citizen his and her voice, and she knows her role as citizen. And this is very important for me as an achievement.

And I think another achievement as I introduced it at the beginning is having a legitimate government. This government was not appointed by a single, let's say, president, man, or an authority. It was first of all formed, it was through a negotiation, a very hard negotiation between the three parties of the coalition and the civil society. It is at the same time the expression of political will because after the revolution we have to have a government that has a political vision, a political will that expresses a political choice of the people. But we have also many ministers and secretary of state who are technocrats, who are people who know their files, who know their domain, the field in which they are going to be, to run it, and to be a decision maker. This is the first, I think, achievement.

And the second factor is that this government was, or the confidence was that this government was voted on by our assembly. The vote was not easy. It was a very difficult test, and believe me, I was co-president, I chaired half of the session of voting the confidence for the government, and it was one of the toughest sessions I chaired. But I can say that all the session was very tough. Some of my Tunisian friends know that I have had many tests, and through the sessions I was chairing, but it was, the confidence to the government but with, also, the same warning – we are controlling you, your work, and we are the eye of the people, of our people, of the people who voted for us.

And we have, so besides our mission we have [of] drafting the constitution, and as a legislative body, we are also having a monthly session of dialogue or debate with the government. And for each session we invite the ministers that we want to ask, we want to debate with them, and this is a very good also achievement because we are learning at the same time as our people. Because all these sessions are directed, or transmitted on the TV – the working of a democracy. Our people are watching ministers being asked, being even thwarted, by their representative, on all the issues: the security issue, employment issue, also the development issue of the – especially between poor and rich regions – and this I think for me is an achievement because a transition cannot be only in laws, writing new laws, and establishing in new institutions, but transition is through practices, through practising democracy. And I think this is also a big achievement.

This is why when I'm invited on some TV programmes, and usually I have, let's say, a classic question: but Tunisian people are afraid when they see some members of the opposition, and they usually name Iyyad, the toughest guy of the opposition, asking very hard questions, and I usually reply, 'please, don't be worried when you see Iyyad asking, but be happy, because this is democracy, the democracy we want'. But the day then when people like Iyyad or Maya [Jibri] or others are silent and they accept everything, so that day Tunisians should start to be worried about the development of democracy. Democracy is this too, is this debate, is this, let's say, difference and even conflicts of ideas. And now we are living the debate both on our constituent assembly but [also] in the society through media and the big debate on the constitution, the content of the constitution – the preamble, the first article, the articles dealing with freedoms and rights, et cetera. All these questions are being debated not only in committees working on these issues, but also on newspapers, on TVs, and with also the popular gathering to which we are invited. All of us are invited to popular gatherings from all parties. And I think this is also an achievement because this is how we can realize transition not only on papers but on minds and on attitudes.

Well, let's come to challenges. They are big. The challenge is, first of all, of course, the economic challenge. We are – indeed, the revolution took place because of the very bad, also, economic situation. Well, the surprise for the people is that after the revolution, the situation is even worse. Well, we can understand it! This is, the let's say the normal, or ordinary result of a revolution. But our people and especially the youth, the youth who some of them, or many of them, gave their lives to this revolution, their expectations are very high. And they want their demands and what they claimed or

reclaimed during the revolution to be realized now. They have waited for a lot, for a long time, and so we have to answer these high expectations both on the level of the founding constitution, the Founding Assembly, by being the voice of these young people – and every day I receive a delegation of youth coming from different parts of the country – employment, employment, and again for employment. And of course, from the side of the government because the government, now, they have to present their solutions, their measures. What are their solutions for employing 800,000 unemployed? And among them I think 200,000 are with diploma, let's say bac... and three or four years after baccalaureate. So this is the biggest challenge, how to answer the expectation in the field of unemployment.

The other challenge is how to remedy immediately, immediately or, of course not entirely, partly, to the problem of poverty and especially healthcare. Because we have had, we have been told a big lie during two decades and more by the former regime that oh, we have eradicated poverty from Tunisia. And what we have discovered after the revolution is that poverty is deeply rooted in some areas in Tunisia. The late figures said that 25% of Tunisians live on the level of poverty and under the level of poverty. Imagine that. I think this is a big challenge for all of us. And after the natural catastrophe with the floods, with snowing, heavy snow, the situation of some families became even worse.

What can be a positive factor is that there is a feeling and an attitude of solidarity among Tunisian people that is really surprising and that is wonderful, but this is not enough. So we need very immediate, urgent measures to answer these expectations also. Especially on the level of the healthcare we discovered that half of what we called the white cards, the card that gives the citizen, the poor citizen the right to have free healthcare services, we have discovered that half of these cards are given to people who are not, *comme on dit en français*, yes, eligible. So how to remedy this? So we have a long, it's really a tremendous task, so how to answer poverty and especially healthcare. And of course linked to this, the issue of development in inner regions, the regions from which, where the revolution started.

And the other challenge is security. I think the challenge of security also is very, very important and very big. Especially that we have a neighbour that has also many problems with security in Libya. In Libya, our frontier, we have to secure our frontier from smuggling arms and also the movement of some groups, rebels who are moving from Libya to Tunisia. I visited the city of Tataouine in the south of Tunisia, and many, many people spoke about this issue, the issue of security. But this is not only limited to our frontiers. We

have also another problem, is that we are in a region in which some salafi-jihadist groups are still active. And even if they are not, let's say, acting in our territory, they cross our territory, and you know that we have in two areas, we have arrested people and there's even a fight, a battle between them, and both the national guards and the army, some members of the army. So we have this challenge to, how to determine their locations, their identity, and how to prevent their acts before – because this is I think the real challenge, how to prevent them from acting, and at the same time how to keep the respect of the law and not behave like any other regime that, let's say, to protect the society from such violent acts, behaves in a very oppressive, in a very oppressive way. So we have at the same time to respect these two, let's say, tasks or challenges, and this is very important.

And the other challenge is what we are witnessing now in Tunisian society, the polarization of the debate, that we have excess, or excessive, let's say, positions both from one side and the other. So the political parties, the Tunisians, who have chosen, let's say, the middle, the medium way, and who have chosen legitimacy, elections, national debate, they are being challenged on their left and on their right. And this challenge, for me, also is very important, and I only rely on the nature of Tunisian people that proved during centuries and centuries that Tunisian people are not very tempted by following extreme, let's say, ideas or extreme behaviour, and they tend to be moderate. But it's also a very, very hard battle. These are the challenges we are facing. Of course I think there are many others. Maybe you can, they can come through your questions.

But to face these challenges, first of all we have to rely on ourselves and our resources in our capacity as Tunisian people, not only to do a revolution but to build a democracy after, let's say, crashing dictatorship. This is the real achievement. But also I hope that we can rely on our friends and the international community to help us economically and politically too in this mission, in our mission of building state institutions, a state in which law is respected, a democracy – a modern democracy – and to reconcile our people with itself. I think this is very important. I hope we can rely on them. And I feel from the numerous delegations that visited Tunisia and are still visiting Tunisia, that there is a specific attention and specific importance given to this Tunisian experience which can be a model to follow in other countries if it succeeds. Well, but, if there is a failure, I'm afraid, I'm afraid it can, it will be the failure of democrats all over the world. So this is not only a Tunisian challenge, but I think it's our challenge, all of us.

Merci, I hope that I managed to transmit to you some ideas about this, about the achievements and the challenges, and I'm ready to answer your questions, and I hope that my Tunisian English was understandable. *Merci*.