

# TUNISIA: THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSITION

Two years after the revolution, high hopes for the Tunisian transition are giving way to a more sober assessment of the situation. The major challenges facing the country today are political instability, reaching consensus on the role of religion in the state, reforming the internal security forces, and improving the socio-economic outlook.



*The situation in Tunisia remains tense : funeral of the assassinated opposition leader, Chokri Belaïd. Tunis, 8 February 2013.* Reuters / Louafi Larbi

Tunisia's domestic situation seemed to augur well for the transition. Its predominantly Arab and Sunni Muslim population is well-educated, with over one-third of Tunisians in tertiary education, and traditionally oriented towards moderation. The country had a civil society and a separation of military and political power. Though it possesses few natural resources (phosphates and petroleum), the country boasted a vibrant tourism industry. Optimism appeared well-founded as the country rapidly established an interim government tasked with organising elections to form a national constituent assembly that would draft a new constitution.

However, recent developments prompt a more sober assessment of the situation in Tunisia. The draft constitution was delayed and only published in April. Unemployment is higher than in 2010, and economic

growth has changed very little from pre-revolutionary levels. Two years into the transition, the key challenges facing the country are maintaining political stability, defining the relationship between religion and politics, reforming remnants of the previous regime, and generating more inclusive growth to absorb high unemployment and reduce severe regional inequalities.

As the first Arab Spring country to embark on transforming authoritarian state structures and the economy, the Tunisian case is a reminder that transitions in the Middle East and North Africa are highly complex, unstable, and lengthy processes. If Tunisia falters still further, the prospects for other revolutionary states look all the more uncertain. Such a development could also risk strengthening the position of those in favour of "managed" and often cosmetic reform within the region.

## Background to the current situation

The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia's neglected interior on 17 December 2010 provided the decisive spark for the Tunisian revolution. The main grievances that led to the uprising were a lack of representation, social injustices generated by a corrupt regime, persistently high unemployment, and uneven regional development. In the face of mass protest and calls for his departure, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled the country on 14 January 2011.

Promising initial steps were made toward democratic transition. The first free and fair elections were held in October 2011, producing a coalition government comprising the Islamic party Ennahdha, which garnered 41 per cent of the vote, and two centre-left non-Islamist parties, Congress for the Republic (French acronym CPR) and Ettakatol, which won 14 per cent and 10 per cent, respectively. The newly-elected government stated that it would call a new round of elections on completion of the new constitution in one year's time. Economic growth, which had slumped in 2011, also began to recover in 2012.

However, the transitional process began to encounter a number of setbacks. The completion of the constitution was delayed. One of the reasons for the deferral was the divisive issue of the place of religion in the state. The stalemate over the constitution resulted in parliamentary and presidential elections being pushed back from June to the end of the year. Political uncertainty generated by these deferments has been exacerbated by increasing polarisation

among political elites, brought to a climax in February with the assassination of vocal opposition politician Chokri Belaïd, secretary-general of the leftist Unified Nationalist Democratic Party. In the shadow of these developments, Tunisia's economic recovery risks being derailed.

### Political landscape

Following the revolution, Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally (French acronym RCD) party was disbanded, and senior members, who had held office over the past decade, were banned from running or voting in the elections. Ennahdha clearly emerged as a major political actor with the stated aim of promoting a moderate vision of Islam compatible with the principles of democracy and citizenship as the basis of rights. Its electoral success is explained by its continued capacity to mobilise religious and rural communities, despite many of its activists and supporters being driven underground or into exile and its leadership being transferred to London and Paris under the Ben Ali regime. It also benefitted from its popular legitimacy and perceived incorruptibility, as well as the broad appeal of reconciling Islam and democracy in a country where the population is predominantly Muslim, but accustomed to a secular state.

Like Ennahdha, junior partners in the trika government also existed prior to the revolution, although only Ettakatol formed part of a legalised opposition under Ben Ali. With liberal, but socially sensitive agendas, both parties enjoy strong support in the more prosperous coastal regions. Ennahdha's willingness to work with these parties seemed a promising sign for transition through consensus. However, divisions within the governing coalition have emerged, revealing the trika's fragility. Ettakatol and CPR have been frustrated with the government's inability to respond to the country's pressing challenges as well as by Ennahdha's lack of consultation and appointment of loyalists to key positions within the state.

Ennahdha itself is divided and challenged by both Islamists and non-Islamists. Divisions exist between pragmatists and conservatives within its political elite, as well as between its party elite and its more militant base. It also does not wish to lose ground to the Salafists, who were not represented in the elections, but wield political influence. While traditionally reticent to engage in national politics, Salafists

have become increasingly politically active, seeking the inclusion of reference to Sharia law in the constitution and restrictions on blasphemy. Most Salafists come from lower middle class and poor segments of society on the periphery of urban centres and in the country's interior, where they have stepped in to fill a vacuum in public services and are involved in the informal economy. They compete with Ennahdha for support from this constituency.

Ennahdha's dominance of the political scene has prompted non-Islamist parties to unite against it. The most significant bloc to emerge is centre-leftist and led by Nidaa Tounes, a party created in 2012 by Beji Caid Essebsi, who served as prime minister in the interim government. It brings together leftists, liberals, and former members of Ben Ali's RCD. Nidaa Tounes has formed a union with other non-Islamist parties and enjoys the support of the powerful Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT) labour federation, which resisted co-optation by the previous regime and has the capacity to mobilise across different sectors of society, as well as cross-regionally. The presence of former RCD members in Nidaa Tounes, as well as other opposition parties, continues to cause controversy. But, as yet, no wholesale exclusion of former officials from politics has occurred, making them potential players in steering the transition.

### Religion, the state, and identity

Political stability is threatened by growing polarisation between Islamists and non-Islamists, as well as intra-Islamist competition. The role of religion in the state is a particularly divisive issue. Initiatives put forward by Ennahdha parliamentarians during the drafting of the constitution, only to be later withdrawn, were a reflection of the dilemma Ennahdha faces: appealing to religiously conservative members of its party and society as well as avoiding alienating liberal-progressives. In February 2012, Ennahdha parliamentarians proposed making Sharia law the basis of the Tunisian legal system, despite the party having stated during its electoral campaign that it would not do so. After weeks of public protest and a threat to step down by Speaker of the National Constituent Assembly Mustapha Ben Jaafar, Ennahdha's governing council decided that the party should not support the proposal. The inclusion of a clause in the pre-draft constitution defining women as complementary to men in family life, as



well as the July 2012 proposal criminalising blasphemy, were also put forward and then withdrawn in response to mass protests as well as criticism by the media and civil rights groups.

Ennahdha's perceived lenience towards Salafist efforts to enforce what they see as morally correct behaviour has also had a polarising effect, and is also a reflection of its competition with Salafists for ultra-conservative vote. Traditionally more concerned with social norms than politics, Salafists have disrupted university campuses, demanding that only women wearing the *niqab* be allowed to attend classes, and called for restrictions on the arts, protesting against the showing of some films and attacking the US embassy in reaction to the US-made film "The Innocence of Muslims" in September 2012. While the government has been accused of being too tolerant of Salafists, its recent clamp-down on the radical Salafist group Ansar al-Sharia, which claimed responsibility for the attack on the US embassy, suggest that it is now willing to take a firmer position in relation to this strain of Salafism. The Salafist movement as a whole, however, is unlikely to dwindle. Moreover, continued controversy over provisions related to role of religion, which remain vague, are likely to emerge as the final draft constitution is debated and later voted on in the Constituent Assembly and, failing acceptance by a two-thirds majority, in a public referendum.

### Reforming the security sector

Security sector reform (SSR) is essential to underpinning the transition and transforming the relationship between the state and citizens. Remnants of the previous re-

gime are hampering progress, however. Under Ben Ali, the army never played a political role and was nominally under civilian control. By contrast, the internal security forces and the judiciary formed an important pillar of the regime, used as instruments to eliminate opposition and favour those close to the former president. Consequently, resistant and anti-democratic forces within the state tend to be linked to internal security structures and the justice system rather than the armed forces.

Efforts have been made to reform the internal security forces. The impact of measures taken is ambiguous, though. The political police, responsible for collecting intelligence on Ben Ali's opponents, have been disbanded. However, it is also unclear whether they have been simply integrated into the police force, and their files have still not been made public. While police training in human rights has begun, rules of engagement, police custody, and police intelligence practices remain largely unchanged since the Ben Ali era. Ultimately, police culture needs to undergo a more radical transformation that reflects changed state-societal relations.

In a related area, the independence of the judiciary remains questionable, with corruption still existing within the judicial system. The main oversight body, the Supreme Council of Magistrates, which is responsible for appointing, promoting, and penalising magistrates, was directly controlled by the executive under Ben Ali. It remains only partially reformed. Purges of judges have taken place. However, this has happened without specification of the reasons for dismissal, and it is believed that a number of judges have been forced to resign for political reasons. There have been similar inadequacies in the area of transitional justice, which had been intended to address human rights abuses under the former regime. So far, the process has mostly focused on abuses during the revolution rather than those that occurred under Ben Ali. It has been also appropriated by the state rather than being placed in the hands of civil society.

### Socio-economic challenges

A successful transition is also threatened by a lack of improvement in economic growth compared to pre-revolutionary levels and continued high unemployment. The already difficult socio-economic situation was badly affected by the uprising. The period from 2010 to 2011 saw a de-

cline in revenue from tourism, with the number of tourists falling by more than 50 per cent, and a drop in foreign direct investment by more than a half. The Tunisian economy has also been affected by an unfavourable regional and international environment, notably in relation to Libya and Europe. Tunisia has experienced a reduction in trade with Libya as result of the latter's civil war and subsequent instability. The European Union (EU) is Tunisia's largest trading partner, and the economic crisis in Europe has resulted in a reduction of Tunisian exports.

Against this difficult internal and external backdrop, there is a pressing need to generate more inclusive growth and to reduce high unemployment, which remains at 16.5 per cent, particularly amongst the youth population, which constitutes 70 per cent of the unemployed. Youth between 15–29 years old form one-third of the labour force. The economy has not been growing fast enough to provide young people with employment, though. Adding to this demographic trend is a skills mismatch. While the number of university graduates has been steadily growing, reaching approximately 16 per cent in 2010, most available employment consists of low-skill jobs in the informal economy.

Added to the continued problem of high unemployment, regional inequalities persist. Social unrest is still palpable in poorer interior regions. In Siliana in November 2012, social protests resulted in several days of clashes between security forces and protesters. Similar confrontations took place in in Kef, also in the interior, and in Ben Guerdane, in the southeast, in mid-January. These protests were directed at the government and its failure to improve the situation in Tunisia's poor and rural inner regions and outlying areas of the south. An inability to address unemployment and the concerns of the vulnerable and those in the depressed interior risks further polarising political and social actors.

### The outlook

Two years after the revolution, Tunisia's transition looks far more fragile than expected. The chief grievances that led to the revolution have not been adequately addressed. In order to stabilise the situation, a number of measures need to be taken, such as developing a framework

that supports human rights-based reform of internal security forces, institutional reforms that enable greater transparency and oversight of the security forces, and further reform of the Supreme Council of the Judiciary. In the socio-economic sphere, more decisive measures are required to address the structural problems afflicting the economy, notably improving the business environment for investment and small and medium-sized enterprises, reducing the mismatch between skills and jobs, and increasing investment in the interior of the country. However, transforming existing realities in a short-time frame is unrealistic due to the domestic political situation, the structural nature of the problems, and resistance to reform from within the state. If accepted, the final draft constitution should reduce some degree of political uncertainty and allow reforms to move further forward.

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iculties. External actors should focus their support on promoting dialogue, SSR, and rural development in the country.

### Swiss engagement

Since the beginning of 2011, Switzerland has been engaged in supporting the transitions in North Africa. Tunisia is one of the focal points of that assistance. Switzerland has been primarily affected by the revolution and transition in Tunisia in relation to the Ben Ali fortune, refugees, and irregular migration. Cognisant of Switzerland's economic and security interests in a stable democratic Tunisia, Swiss authorities acted promptly to support the transition process, freezing approximately CHF60 million of assets linked to the Ben Ali clan. In March 2011, a Swiss programme to provide assistance in the transition was created, which has enjoyed year-on-year increases in funding (CHF9.72 million in 2011; CHF14.41 million in 2012; and CHF17.26 million in 2013), with support expected to continue until 2016.

Adopting an whole-of-government approach, involving the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (the Directorate of Political Affairs, the Directorate of Public International Law and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, SDC), the Federal Department of Justice and Police (the Federal Office for Migration), and the

Federal Department of Economic Affairs (the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, SECO), its support for the transition focuses on three main areas of assistance: transition to democracy and human rights; economic development and job creation; and migration and protection of the vulnerable.

Of particular note are projects within the programme that address issues crucial for the transition, such as SSR, reduction of regional development inequalities, and job creation. In conjunction with the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of the Armed Forces (DCAF), Switzerland provides expertise in the area of SSR, enjoying the status of a trusted and neutral partner. The Swiss programme also aims to support the creation of 10,000 jobs by assisting young people and women in rural areas to set up small enterprises. Switzerland is also working to improve access to public infrastructure and services in interior regions, creating jobs through their realisation, as well as through the provision of micro-finance and micro-insurance.

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