

The Maghreb: Common Challenges and Diverging Approaches to Transition

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The Maghreb in the Face of the Terrorist Threat

Three years after the events that shook the Arab world, the Maghreb region is still experiencing an unprecedented terrorist threat. In Tunisia, this threat weighs heavily on the country's politics and threatens to upset the fragile balance of its new political configuration. After the assassination of two emblematic figures of the Tunisian left, Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Ibrahim, the country suffered an attack at Mount Chaambi, near the Algerian border. The outcome of this attack was judged by the Tunisian authorities as the worst to be recorded by the military since independence. After a six-month 'ceasefire,' the country was again the target of a terrorist attack, the bloodiest since the fall of the Ben Ali regime. The assailants, who were targeting the seat of the Tunisian Parliament, entered the Bardo National Museum and opened fire on tourists, causing no less than 23 casualties and 47 wounded.

In contrast to Tunisia, Morocco remains the most stable country in the region. No attacks have been registered since the one in Marrakech in 2011. This notwithstanding, the country remains a prime target for terrorist organisations, as indicated by the number of terrorist cells dismantled by the Moroccan authorities in 2014. Indeed, the preventive approach adopted by Morocco seems to be paying off and ensuring the country a certain immunity. According to official sources, the security services managed to foil numerous terrorist plans that, if we are to believe the official Ministry of the Interior communiqués,

would have destabilised the country had they not been thwarted. The tracking of terrorism that allowed a number of terrorist cells to be dismantled in 2014 has continued in 2015. Thus, according to a Ministry of the Interior communiqué from 13 April 2015, at least six members of a terrorist cell preparing attacks on behalf of the Islamic State were arrested in Selouane, in northern Morocco. According to the same source, the suspects are followers of jihadi thought who were planning the assassination of individuals with religious convictions contrary to those of the Islamic State organisation.

A Difficult Economic Climate

The second common denominator of the Maghreb countries in 2014 resides in the persistence of economic imbalances that weigh down their restart capabilities. This notwithstanding, although the three countries have experienced the effects of a difficult regional and international economic climate, the fact remains that how the crisis presents varies significantly from one state to another according to each of the three Maghreb countries' structural makeup. Hence, Algeria is the country experiencing the worst effects from the international economic climate. This is particularly due to the plummeting oil prices and their repercussions on the country's macroeconomic balance. In June, only two months after the re-election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika as President for a fourth term, the price of oil began a sharp fall, reaching its lowest level since 2009 in early January 2015, at 47.25 dollars per barrel. Following that came a fall in oil revenue, leading to a major increase in the balance of payments deficit. In fact, according to the IMF, the current account should register a deficit of 26 billion dollars in 2015. This colossal figure is un-

precedented since Bouteflika took up the presidency 16 years ago.¹ To remedy this situation, Algeria does not seem to have any alternatives other than dipping into the country's savings, the Revenue Regulation Fund (Fonds de régulation des recettes, FRR), to fill the gaping hole in the government's accounts. But at this rate of expenditure, the FRR will be exhausted quite quickly.

In Morocco, 2014 was the year of the most difficult choices and the most unpopular decisions. The Benkirane Administration undertook reform of the Compensation Fund, eliminating subsidies of all liquid petroleum products, a painful and risky measure in various regards. Moreover, 2014 was one of the worst years in terms of growth in a decade, with the rate not surpassing 2.5%. In any case, the Benkirane Administration managed to reduce the budgetary deficit, which was 4.9% of the GDP in 2014. This progress was possible primarily due to a good agricultural yield and an improvement in the economic health of the eurozone, Morocco's main trade partner. These factors had a positive impact on Morocco's exports, though structurally, it registered a trade deficit on the order of 20% of the GDP.

Another indicator of the economic crisis in which the three Maghreb countries are immersed is the unemployment affecting a large portion of the workforce. Tunisia, which is still suffering the after-effects of its rupture with its authoritarian past, has the highest unemployment rate in the Maghreb. The figures published by the National Statistics Institute show that the unemployment rate reached 15% during the last quarter of 2014, whereas it was only 14.8% over the course of the second quarter of that year.² Morocco and Algeria experienced nearly identical unemployment rates, relatively lower than Tunisia's. In Algeria, according to two employment surveys conducted among households by the National Statistics Office in April and September 2014, the unemployment rate stood at 10.6%, meaning an increase of 0.6% over the preceding years, remaining at 10% from 2009 to 2013. Note in this regard that unemployment affects

25% of Algerian youth, including young graduates. With regard to Morocco, despite the context of crisis, the Kingdom was the only Maghreb country where the unemployment rate returned to under 10%. According to the country's High Commission for Planning (Commissariat au Plan, HCP), the unemployment rate is now 9.9%, having decreased by 0.3 points between the first quarter of 2014 and that of 2015.³

The Price of Maghreb Non-Integration

Intra-Maghreb trade continues to feel the effects of the Morocco-Algeria rupture. The closing of the border between the two countries not only handicaps the two countries' economies, but also prevents the establishment of an authentic Maghreb integration that would allow them to save over 2 billion dollars per year, according to IMF estimates.

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Trade continues to be affected by the closure of the border in 1994 and the project for regional economic integration is still blocked. "In a world where goods circulate much more freely than people, the Algerian-Moroccan standoff seems like a sacrilege, making it impossible to imagine a large-scale economic project," states an Algerian journalist before substantiating his remarks with the example of Renault, whose Moroccan and Algerian factories cannot be connected by land.⁴

¹ Tewfik ABDELBARI, "L'année économique du 4^e mandat : des difficultés et des défis," *Tout sur l'Algérie*, 16 April 2015, www.tsa-algerie.com/20150416/annee-economique-du-4e-mandat-des-difficultes-et-des-defis/

² The rate went from 14.1% in 2004 to 14.8% in 2014, the Tunisian National Statistics Institute stated. According to Saïdi, the decreased unemployment rate, which stood at 14.8% over the course of the second quarter of last year, can be attributed to the hiring of over 23,000 higher education graduates to work on the population census carried out in that quarter (April and May 2014).

³ See the informative note on the state of the labour market published by the Moroccan High Commission for Planning.

⁴ Further information available here: MAÏNA F., "Rivalité politique entre Alger et Rabat, la tragédie économique", *Algérie-Focus.com*, 21 May 2013, www.algerie-focus.com/blog/2013/05/rivalite-politique-entre-alger-et-rabat-la-tragedie-economique/

The negative effects of the political tension between Algeria and Morocco are not limited to the economies of the rival countries. These tensions continued to make the Maghreb lose time, a Maghreb that, according to various observers, is today a 'non-region' on the economic level. Although Morocco is Algeria's number one client thanks to Algerian exports to Morocco primarily consisting of hydrocarbons, there is no denying what some qualify as an 'economic tragedy' caused by the political rivalry between the two countries. In his work entitled "Algérie et Maroc : Quelles convergences économiques," economist Camille Sari rightly notes that: "The absence of a Maghrebi economic union hinders the development of trade in goods and services and foreign exchange, as well as the circulation of human resources"; before concluding that "the Maghreb is the only region in the world without regional construction and where intra-[regional] trade is insignificant."⁵

Tunisia: The Hope of Democratic Transition

With the election of a new President of the Republic in 2014, Tunisia completed the last electoral stage of its transition process. The cradle of the so-called Arab Spring, Tunisia aspires to prove the emergence of a democracy is always possible in the Arab World. In fact, the success of the Tunisian model can not only be attributed to endogenous factors linked particularly to the Tunisian society's dynamism, the maturity of the political class and the quality of its leadership, as well as the military's neutral position, but also to exogenous factors associated with the country's regional context. It is from this perspective that one can understand the Ennahdha party's difficult yet historic and decisive decision to step down in order to spare Tunisian Islamists the fate of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. There is no doubt the Tunisian transition process has great chances of making Tunisia a model of democratisation in Northern Africa. In any case, this model remains dependent on the operation of the new system, which will, among other things, have to handle two challenges associated with the current transi-

tional context. The first challenge would be for the country's new leaders to eliminate Ben Ali's authoritarian legacy and attempt to forge a new democratic legitimacy for themselves beyond the polls. This challenge is all the more serious and urgent, given that a large part of Tunisian youth perceives the elites having marked the transition process (drafting of the constitution and national dialogue) as belonging to the Ben Ali regime.⁶ Indeed, newly elected President Beji Caid Essebsi, Prime Minister Habib Essid and other members of the government occupied key posts in the Bourguiba or Ben Ali regimes and do not have revolutionary legitimacy. The second challenge of the new Tunisian regime would be to find adequate solutions to the economic dysfunctions adversely affecting the country's efforts at economic recovery. The growth estimates advanced by the IMF (3.7%) or the Tunisian government (3%) will most likely be affected by the terrorist attacks shaking the country in early 2015. In this regard, of course, tourism, one of the Tunisian economy's mainstays, is particularly sensitive to security hazards.

Morocco: The Year of the Vagaries of the Third Track

The third year of cohabitation of the monarchy and the Islamists of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) seemed to confirm the hypothesis according to which change always occurs within the framework of continuity in Morocco. Some believe the new constitution has given rise to a diarchy.⁷ Now the Moroccan political system, they believe, functions with an executive branch shared by two institutions whose powers more or less balance out. In addition to the institution of the monarchy, conventionally the main actor of the Moroccan Executive Branch, the new text is considered to have raised the government to an authentic second point of impetus for policymaking in Morocco. That said, this hypothesis/aspiration based on a parliamentary reading of the Moroccan Constitution does not seem to hold up to the facts and the way the new institutional system operates. Apart

⁵ Camille SARI, *Algérie et Maroc : Quelles convergences économiques ?*, Éditions Cabrera in partnership with Gnôsis - Éditions de France, Paris, 2011.

⁶ Maha YAHYA, *Beyond Tunisia's Constitution: The Devil in the Details*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Beirut, April 2015.

⁷ By way of example, see the study by Mohamed Amine BENABDELLAH: "L'institution gouvernementale dans la constitution marocaine." REMALD, double issue 112-113, September-December 2013.

from a few urgent, highly problematic and very politically risky issues (reform of the Compensation Fund and pension plans), the government remains nearly incapable of truly taking the political initiative, in the sense of defining the country's general political choices and orientation. These remain the prerogative of the monarchy, whose means of action are far from being challenged by the new institutional system established by the 2011 Constitution.

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Three years after the establishment of the new institutional system, there is no denying that the decision-making process has remained marked by certain dysfunctions of the 'old system.' The disconnection between decision and responsibility that had always marked the political system continues to adversely affect the regime's efforts at democratisation. Turning to the High Council for Education to prepare a reform project for the education system is one of the expressions of this disconnection. Another form this phenomenon takes consists in the strong presence of technocrat ministers, who controlled over 51% of the state budget in 2014. The ministers belonging to the government coalition parties controlled less than 49%, including the PJD ministers, with only 7.46% of the budget.

The year 2014 was also marked by an unprecedented level of tension in relations between the Head of Government and opposition party leaders. The latter continually reproach Mr. Benkirane for having deliberately abandoned his constitutional prerogatives. For his part, the Head of Government repeatedly states that his administration is a simple collaborator of the King, who remains the true holder of power according to the provisions of the 2011 Constitution.

Algeria: The Status Quo of Bouteflika's Fourth Term

Politics in Algeria have been marked primarily by the presidential elections leading President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to his fourth term. After having survived the so-called Arab Spring events, the Algerian regime was facing a difficult test in the presidential elections on 17 April 2014. Although it was initially assumed that incumbent President Bouteflika, suffering from health problems, would not run for office, this scenario became increasingly uncertain as the elections approached. On 22 February 2014, Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal made the incumbent President's candidacy official. After the deadline for new candidacies had passed, 10 candidacies were registered with the Constitutional Council, which validated six through its 14 March 2014 decision.⁸ These elections were marked by a wave of protests after the official announcement of the incumbent's candidacy. Numerous protests against President Bouteflika's fourth term were held throughout the electoral campaign as well as the day after the results were announced. The Barakat movement assembled civil society, which organised and mobilised via the Facebook and Twitter social media to call for a protest against a fourth term for Bouteflika. The movement began with protests in Algiers, which resulted in many Barakat members and other citizens participating in the protests being detained for questioning by the police. In Aurès, the B'zayed association, which is the local branch of Barakat, organised a protest on 20 March in which it attempted to bring together the greatest number of protesters. In any event, the voices raised against the fourth term and calls for boycotting the election expressed by a considerable number of Algerian civil society actors and political parties did not prevent the elections from being held on 17 April 2014. Nevertheless, the success of these elections was only possible at the price of a sharp nosedive in the participation rate, which only reached 51.7%, as compared to 74% in 2009.

⁸ These were, namely, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Louisa Hanoune, Ali Benflis, Ali Fawzi Rebaïne, Moussa Touati and Abdelaziz Belaïd.