

Tunisia's Transition: the Delicate Blossom of Political Compromise

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The Tunisian uprising in late 2010 and early 2011 heralded the era of post-Bourguibism and ushered in a 'Second Republic.' While several structural elements of this new political and governance system, both institutional and procedural, have crystallized over the past five years (constitution, pluralistic party landscape, free elections), other features are still being debated with verve (interpretation of the constitution, identity questions, the relationship between Islam and the State, the need for economic reforms and freedom of expression). Even though the possibility to openly and publicly address such previously unthought-of issues represents a major achievement of the 'Dignity Revolution,' the underlying contending worldviews of the major political stakeholders tend to exacerbate rather than subdue societal polarization. This mixed record indicates the ambivalent and still open-ended nature of the progressing socio-political transformation.

Tentative Transformation

There is an ongoing debate on the root causes of Tunisia's recent transformational predicament. Those who favor socio-economic explanations for a variety of ills, including Islamist radicalization, tend to sketch over two essential features. On the one hand, economic hardship, in particular regional disparities that pre-existed the current situation and triggered several uprisings, including the latest one which began at the end of 2010. On the other hand,

Salafist and fundamentalist religious indoctrination had already progressed during the 1970s, preparing a fertile ground for radicalization and political violence, which now erupts to the fore from time to time. However, both ingredients for civil and political unrest had been thoroughly subdued by the previous regimes and the extent of repression they employed. Hence, what currently represents a novelty in Tunisian domestic affairs are three elements. First, the pluralistic diversification of the political landscape, including a significant role for Islamist parties in politics, coupled with a limited ability of the non-Islamist camp to close its ranks. Secondly, the exacerbation of general economic hardship and, thirdly, the systematic and relatively unimpeded recruitment practices of Salafi-jihadi organizations. Accordingly, Tunisian society faces the triple challenge of reconstituting a political system, while simultaneously tackling the effects of economic downturn and countering the rise of violent Islamist extremism. A tall order, by all means.

Political Pluralism

In the political realm, the creation of a new order over the past five years has introduced tremendous change. New state institutions, such as a vibrant parliament, constituted by a host of new political actors have been put in place. New official bodies, such as the IVD (Instance Vérité et Dignité) or ISIE (Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Élections) are flanking this process of institutionalization. They ensure that transitional justice makes progress and manage the electoral process. In addition, this institutionalized politics is eagerly supplemented by more informal politics. The organized 'civil society' group, the 'National Dialogue Quartet,' which

was awarded the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize in October 2015, remains in fact an essential element of mediation in a political landscape that still has to learn to abide by its own set of rules. Its reminder to the government to set a firm date for a national conference on terrorism is a recent example of its perseverance.

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Even though there is currently no specific controversy, such as there was during the constitution-writing process in 2013/14, deep ideological cleavages between the main political forces continue to unfold. As the existing, societal Islamist-secularist divide rose to the level of political relevance, the risk emerged that polemics and polarization might challenge the current *cohabitation*, which has survived to date despite deep-seated distrust, if not outright mutual suspicion.

Yet, despite the urgency of translating the post-revolutionary institutionalization process into policies and law-making, Nidaa Tounes, the winner of the post-revolutionary blues during the 2014 elections, is currently unmaking itself. The disappointment with the policy-making of the 'Troika'-government (2011-2014), which allowed the anti-Nahdha platform to perform so strongly, is now at risk of further increasing. This brittle, multi-person and -movement platform, whose common denominator is an anti-Islamist orientation, is suffering, particularly from conflicting economic visions. The departure of 33 deputies from Nidaa Tounes in April (2016) to establish a new political formation under the aegis of Mohsen Marzouk, Al-Hurra, led to a re-composition of parliamentary majorities – and Al-Nahda (Ennahda) to return to the forefront as the single largest party.

Al-Nahda has been ready to invest and risk a considerable part of its acquired political capital by, eventually, taking a low profile during the constitutional debate and with regards to the political exclu-

sion law. It's 'no' to the inclusion of a Sharia-reference in the Constitution and its rejection of the political exclusion law gained it a reputation for pragmatism. Yet this flexibility led to significant losses during the 2014 polls, now rescinded by the voluntary deconstruction of its strongest political opponent.

Major Policy Challenges

Beyond the internal dynamics in the Assembly, the political domain *per se* is confronted with five major issues, which the elected representatives will have to address, in one way or the other, rather sooner than later. The first is related to substantial disdain for organized party politics amongst the biggest demographic group, i.e. the youth. Their broad abstention from elections amounts to a general trend of dislocation from the political realm. However, if the new Tunisian political system tends to function without a significant part of the popular sovereign, how can a new understanding of inclusive citizenship develop?

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The second challenge is related to the issue of the revolutionary legitimacy of the new political players. As the transitional phase of mass mobilization toward institutionalization has come to an end, the entire spectrum of political formations continues to promote its own, idiosyncratic depiction of the revolution. In that sense a departure from the revolutionary narrative has not yet been initiated in order to provide legitimacy. However, this amounts to a shortsighted strategy, since, eventually, the political entrepreneurs will not be judged by the attractiveness – or accuracy – of their narrative but rather by the quality of their decisions, in particular those addressing economic hardship and security.

The third issue is linked to the lack of representation of the hinterland. Allegedly, a so called 'coastal lobby' (*Sahil*-narrative) has a much stronger representation in the Assembly than the governorates of the interior (the central governorate Kasserine, for instance, has eight MPs in Tunis). These longstanding structures have effectively not been replaced by the reconstitution of the governance system. Being both, a reflection of demographics and economic power, this situation is nevertheless conducive to a continuation of the biased focus on developing the Mediterranean shore (*Sahil*), to the detriment of the underdeveloped western, central and southern areas. Local coordination committees have been thriving during the past five years in an effort to manage locally circumscribed affairs. But should such unofficial bodies represent a decentralized central government? As the date for municipal elections has now been set for March 2017, a further reconfiguration of the political landscape can be expected.

The fourth problem pertains to reconciliation and transitional justice (TJ). The 'Instance Vérité et Dignité' has been established to handle TJ requests. In 2015, for instance, a demand for reparations (based on economic indicators) has been filed by Kasserine, a region suffering from economic underdevelopment, perceived as the region's marginalization. At the same time, a highly contentious bill on 'economic reconciliation' was passed by the Assembly to waive charges against perpetrators of past legal infringements. The result, at this stage, is increased disillusionment with the orientation of the political process. The fifth issue is related to accusations of MPs' incompetence, due to a lack of a 'plan' or a discernable vision for Tunisia's future. In practice, there is a pronounced reluctance to implement or even announce reforms. The reasons are twofold: firstly, the political cost of implementing 'painful' reforms such as subsidy cuts or reducing the inefficient and unproductive bloated public sector, and secondly, the resistance of the old clientelistic networks, as they defend their oligarchic stakes.

Yet, the achievements of what could be framed as an emerging culture of political compromise are not only suffering from inherent struggles, and the debated modalities of including civil society. They are also being put into jeopardy by a severe economic crisis that unfolds against the background of a previously burgeoning economy.

Economic Downturn

The deterioration of economic indicators during the five post-revolutionary years is due to the weak performance of Tunisia's main sectors: exports to the EU (with the exception of olive oil) have suffered a setback on account of a lull in European demand, while the tourist sector has been devastated by a series of terrorist attacks aimed at soft targets (Bardo and Sousse, both 2015) and the general increase in terrorist activity targeting the State (Presidential Guard in 2015 and Ben Guerdane in March 2016). This tense situation is further impeded by a marked increase in strikes, reducing productivity and competitiveness.

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Since the downturn started in 2011, more than 280 hotels have closed their doors, corresponding to 50% of the country's capacity. Not only does the tourism sector substantially contribute to the GDP (roughly 7.5%), but, as a service industry, it also relies heavily on human resources, employing a workforce of almost 500,000 if at full capacity. Finally, foreign direct investment has been reduced to a trickle since 2011, based on negative assessments regarding the attractiveness of Tunisia's market. As a consequence, the sovereign debt has risen to 9% of GDP. The unemployment rate, concomitantly, has touched 15%, with youth (under 25s) hit by a staggering 32% (corresponding to 650,000 unemployed in total). Simultaneously the informal sector is picking up, fed by extensive smuggling networks whose trade has started to include light weapons, as highlighted by the repeated uncovering of arms caches. The cost of clandestine economic activity for the State, as measured in tax evasion, amounted to \$600 million for 2014 according to a World Bank estimate.

Yet, despite the knowledge of what drives economic growth (domestic consumption, exports and investments) and an awareness of the need to boost their performance, supportive economic reforms are being blocked by different interest groups. Even though the practice of co-optation has seemingly come to an end, perceptions of exclusion, in particular regional 'discrimination' of the hinterland, persist. Nevertheless, one of the greatest challenges for the current government is to address the high expectations of Tunisians in the economic domain. The consecutive post-revolutionary governments' failure to deliver on their promises regarding economic development (The *livre blanc* on territorial disparities of the first Essebsi government in 2011 or the programme for regional development of the 'troika') caused the situation to escalate in early 2016 with massive clashes throughout the country. But any programmatic response by the State to address the variety of issues is also confronted with the hard reality of a funds shortage in the national budget. External financial support (by International Financial Organizations - IFOs and the European Union) is therefore essential for providing support, and also for facing regional cleavages. If these remain unresolved, uncontrolled internal migration could further destabilize a frail political transition.

Politicized Islam and Fundamentalism

Al-Nahda, by constantly referring to a presupposed Islamic identity of Tunisians, and the need for adequate political representation, is trying to achieve two strategic goals: firstly, gaining credibility as an authentic, and hence particularly legitimate, political representative of Tunisians at large; and secondly, and potentially further-reaching, to erode the secular logic of the existing Tunisian State. The Tunisian State is by no means denying the fact of being a Muslim majority state, as the first paragraph of the new Constitution acknowledges. However, it strictly limits the overlapping of administrative tasks carried out by the State's authorities with metaphysical, religious discourse, and is supposed to control religious institutions.

Nonetheless, as Al-Nahda is first and foremost a political project based on a normative interpretation

of what Islam should be, it embraces the Islamist narrative that amalgamates 'Islam' with politics (or one could argue that Islamicizes politics), and hence also with the State. Yet fundamental concepts of its political theory are not elaborated in much detail, and would require passing a reality check. However, the *Ikhtiraq* (penetration) and *Tatbiq islami* (Islamic implementation) concepts developed by Rachid Al-Ghannouchi are both classical Islamist ideas aiming at undermining secular state institutions.

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This Islamist discourse, understandably, creates an ambivalent and tense relationship between a secularized state and 'Islamism.' But devaluing secularity and *laïcité* by attempting to equate its supposed political outcome with the repression of the Ben Ali regime also has its limitations. The political entrepreneurs of Al-Nahda need to deliver on promises related to their constituencies' day-to-day issues, beyond lofty question of ideological sophistication. The chances of the Islamist project's long-term success, therefore, will depend to a large extent on the practicability of their vision within the specific Tunisian environment, and on the continued appeal of its specific message, in a setting of degraded economic opportunities.

Yet as the fundamentalist Al-Nahda risks losing appeal due to circumstances beyond its control, other Islamist movements, ideologically less conciliatory and lacking in strategic patience, have started taking advantage of the disenchantment with mainstream Islamists. Indeed, Salafism is increasingly emerging as a form of social mobilization, with all the risks this ideological current encapsulates for radicalization of thought and potentially violent developments.

Symbolic Identity Debates

Since Ben Ali's departure from absolute power, Tunisia has embarked on a multidimensional voyage of structural change. Yet, the autocratic and quasi-oligarchic system of governance has not been fully replaced by functioning, self-sustainable, and non-violent political pluralism or an economy that provides sufficient opportunities. Paradoxically, the poor economic record of the State and its institutions is mirrored by persistent expectations towards the State as a provider and a purveyor of jobs, instead of fulfilling its role as an economic enabler.

The evolution from a largely non-politicized and non-ideological upheaval to the emergence of deep socio-political cleavages includes their political manipulation. The main challenge for the coming years, therefore, will be the management of this divide, avoiding the emergence of an ever-deepening rift. Yet both main political camps try to appropriate the discourse on the meaning and orientation of the Tunisian revolution. The Islamist camp favours an Islamic interpretation of Tunisian history, proposing a – yet to be defined – 'Islamic' trajectory of the Tunisian polity based on a purported Islamic core identity. The nationalist, non-Islamist camp, in favour of secularity, aims at separating the esoteric religious discourse from day-to-day politics and, ultimately, the legitimation of political agents by such means.

As the whole range of new political formations is put to the test in a tough, daily reality check, the jury is still out on the question of whether the trajectory from the 'Arab street' (non-citizens) via voters (in terms of political participation and enhanced political rights) to fully-fledged citizenship (able to hold the government accountable) is complete. Several indicators point to an ongoing reconstruction of a new state-society relationship. The estrangement from politics, a continuous trend in particular amongst youth, is but one of these. But post-revo-

lutionary fervor is also about managing expectations. Salafist movements and radical fundamentalist organizations double up on identity and authenticity discourses, whose Islamist monopoly, meanwhile, has been lost by Al-Nahda, perceived as overly pragmatic and more interested in power than ideology.

Tunisia is still embarked on a path of opportunities. Those should be willfully embraced by the responsible Tunisian political elite entrusted with transforming the revolutionary drive into institutional reality, as well as those external partners, including the European Union, who have a variety of reasons for supporting a continued transition towards reform, pluralism and inclusive politics.

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