# The Tunisian Exception

*Profile of a unique political laboratory*

**The Monographs of ResetDOC**

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ResetDOC



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# Introduction

*Federica Zoja*

With the Arab Spring occurring almost a decade ago, the Tunisian Republic's political, social and economic unique responses towards the upheavals of Arab Spring have continued to stand out compared to their North African and Middle Eastern neighbors.

This monograph, which Reset Dialogues on Civilizations dedicates to Tunisian exceptionality, with contributions from academics, constitutionalists, diplomats and journalists who are experts on the MENA area, is the result of a need to revisit the development of this North African country's democratic project, which has transformed from a newborn bud to a young plant that is exposed to the elements yet remains deeply rooted to the ground.

The focus is on the dangers that the smallest political laboratory in the Mediterranean might encounter if a few corrections are not made to its course over the short-medium term.

The first chapter of our journey begins with Yadh Ben Achour, the High Authority of achieving the objectives of the revolution, political reform and democratic transition, who lays bare the historical and philosophical origins of the concept of democracy, while taking into account the most frequent criticisms made against the democratic model and, in particular, Tunisia's ability to address crises and its inclination to work for the good of its citizens. Ben Achour carefully analyses the

notion of freedom, which is easy to attain after the collapse of a totalitarian regime, as well as dignity (harder to achieve and affected by social and economic factors). The skeleton of the new Tunisia – its constitution – already contains all the indications for the rights of individual citizens and the collectivity to be protected. Tunisia's constitution is the result of three years of intense negotiations between the different souls of society, who were all in the national Constituent Assembly that worked on it. The goal of full implementation of the ideal, however, is still out of focus, as it is for all democratic systems worldwide.

In the post-Ben Ali era, attempts have been made to Islamize the Constitutional Charter, as illustrated in Chapter Two by Nader Hammami, a lecturer of the University of Carthago. The intra-constitutional tug-of-war between moderate secularism and democratic islamization reflects the permanent tensions within Tunisian society, which itself mirrors a wider debate. One that, in fact, involves all the political arenas presenting an Islamic majority. Over one decade, "hijacking attempts" by supporters of the more strictly confessional vision have been made on two different levels, social and constitutional, against the backdrop of a search for a shared and recognized national identity, first stifled by colonialism and then taken hostage by the dictatorship. An identity that is simultaneously imbued with the Islamic creed and lay liberalism that were capable, against all odds, of working together when national unity seemed unquestionably about constituting the greater good.

Chapter Three of the book, entrusted to Ruth Hanau Santini, professor of the Università Orientale of Naples, examines political Islamism and, in particular, the past and present evolution of the Islamic Ennahda party. To this day, the Ennahda party is the largest in parliament and also the majority party in local administrations, however Ennahda has not succeeded in expressing a convincing government. Nonetheless, it does play



a primary role in the national unity government born from the legislative elections held in the fall of 2019. Maybe Ennahda is waiting to see how other political forces attempt to tackle the country's still unresolved need for economic and social reform. On its part, the liberal front is fragmented and lacks a political platform, and its identity crisis appears to be still a long way from being resolved. The economic recipe applied to Tunisia by liberal governments, jointly with the so-called democratic Islamists, has left the country in a blind alley. Chapter Four, by Federica Zoja, a journalist who is an expert on North Africa and the Middle East, examines the state of the art of Tunisian modernism: after their recent electoral fiasco in the fall of 2019, movements with a modernist DNA are collectively struggling to deal with needed renovation. They are reeling: no liberal contribution is currently being made to the debate on economic recovery, implementation of political-administrative decentralization, electoral law reform, and the appointment of the Constitutional Court. Both moderate and non-moderate Islamist sirens might take advantage of this modernist silence.

Indeed, how could we forget that at least 5,000 aspirant followers of Caliph Abu Bakr el-Baghdadi left Tunisia for the regional war zone? Men and women became fighters, communicators, administrators and strategists, because determined to contribute to the birth of the self-styled Islamic State. Sometimes they held positions at the top of the architecture of the Jihadi project and, after the collapse of the Caliphate, they returned to their homeland to sow the seeds of hatred. In Chapter Five, university researcher Wael Garnaoui dissects the ambiguity and contradictions of the Tunisian political and institutional authorities in their management of returning fighters. Once again, thanks to public actions and choice of language it is possible to identify underlying political orientations, not openly expressed by institutional authorities but eloquent.

Equal rights for men and women too are set within the framework of a society that is constantly being remodelled. It should be noted that this equality is not the result of the 2011 revolution, but has its roots in the post-colonial Tunisian state. These principles were not just stated and then set out in writing, but were absorbed by society and, more recently, have been questioned by the promoters of a confessional view of the state. The analysis provided by Lindsay J. Benstead, of Portland State University, refers back to women's achievements under the Bourguiba and Ben Ali presidencies and then turns to the future and the challenges yet to be met. But the powerful appearance on the Tunisian scene of populism and conservatism, both more nationalistic than Islamic, has led to new considerations amongst observers of the Tunisian landscape. In Chapter Six, Aymen Boughanmi, a lecturer at the Tunisian Kairuan University, describes the scission of the revolutionary democratic embryo into two related entities in the Tunisian political arena, both of them explosive with their direct and simplistic rhetoric.

The political, economic and social present of the Tunisian Republic finally takes on its three dimensions when it is set on the global stage in the articles by economic historian Emanuele Felice, the career diplomat and president of the Institute of International Affairs (Iai) Ferdinando Nelli Feroci, and the Italian Ambassador to Tunisia Lorenzo Fanara. Their papers, which make up the third part of the monograph, constitute the most conclusive considerations from the international Conference: "The resilience of democracy in a troubling economy", held by Reset Dialogues on civilizations in Tunis on September 20th 2019, in cooperation with Carep – the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies and with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

# Part I

# Democracy under Construction

Chapter I

# A heartfelt call to save Tunisia's Democracy

*Yadh Ben Achour*, Former President of the Haute Instance pour la Réalisation des Objectifs de la Révolution, member of the UN Human Rights Committee

## *Democracy and its critics*

Democracy is a form of government that has been greatly criticized ever since it was discovered by the Greeks. Plato and Aristotle both criticized the democratic system for a number of reasons, as they experienced democracy during the fourth century BCE. Perhaps they had rather negative opinions because they accused the democratic system of causing the decadence of Athens. What democracy has been accused of in a thousand different ways is demagogy. A second critique is that democracy weakens a country's elites and encourages corruption, and the Athenian democracy was one in which corruption was rampant. It is said that democracy is the kingdom of indecision, because democracy requires patience. Above all, the most serious criticism is that democracy leads to despotism. It was Plato who said this, because effectively Greek democracy did, to a certain extent, lead to the dictatorship of the Thirty Tyrants, just after the Peloponnesian War (404 B.C.).

Has such criticism been verified by history, or not? I don't believe so. I know that certain democratic experiences, including those with ancient traditions such as in Germany or Latin American countries, did lead to dictatorships. Germany had Hitler, Italy

had Mussolini and therefore to a certain extent this has proved to be true. What I am interested in is explaining why I defend democracy, and why I am a democrat and expect to remain so as I age. It is simply because I believe democracy is the only regime worthy of humankind and of human nature.

Why do I think that democratic rule is universal and the worthiest of humankind? If one considers human being as a volume in space, including defending its life, defending its body against diseases, against physical illness, and if we consider man as a moral being, as a speaking, thinking, discerning individual, and if we consider a man, or a human being, as a social being by nature, I would say that democracy is the only regime that respects human nature. Namely, it respects the natural tendency of human beings to flee suffering, to be deprived of his right to live, to be submitted to physical or moral prejudice, or to be deprived of his right to think, to speak, and to participate in public affairs. Democratic theory, as a whole, is entirely based on non-suffering principles. Indeed, the democratic norm recognizes the physical dimension of human beings, namely the right to life and the right to physical integrity. It is also the only system of social life and government that acknowledges humankind's moral rights: the right to think, firstly, but also the right to express oneself, and the right to do so freely through discussions in the press and the public sphere, as well as the right to protest or to participate at a social level.

### *A precious gift for Tunisia*

In Tunisia, we are experiencing a magnificent period, because Tunisians are participating in politics, which is something we did not experience during the dictatorship. To give one recent example, following the legislative elections of October 6, 2019, the House of People's Representatives, after a one-day debate on Friday, January 10, 2020, rejected a vote of confidence in the government led by Habib Jemli, a vote which had been proposed by the majority party Ennahda. Such a democratic scenario, which reveals the existence of vigorous institutional counter-powers, was inconceivable in Tunisia before the revolution.



At the moment Tunisians are finding democracy tiresome, but when compared to what we experienced under the dictatorship, when we were in a state of coma, we are now instead in a state of democratic over-excitement, which I prefer. Therefore, I would like to summarize by saying that I defend democracy because democracy is the most natural form of government, the most universal and the most suited to the dignity of humankind. It is a principle that respects dignity, equality and the participation of human beings. I also believe that democracy is far superior to previous human experience. Even when democratic practices fail, whether in Italy, in Tunisia, in France, etc., it does not mean that the democratic norm, which is above historical circumstances, has to be condemned because historic failures do not affect the ontological greatness of democracy. I believe that the democratic principle is an ideal that goes beyond history and geography: we evaluate whether a given system is democratic or not compared to the democratic ideal, knowing that there exists no pure democratic regime on the face of the earth. There are no perfect democracies.

In my mind there is no such thing as Western democracy, African democracy, Chinese democracy or Islamic democracy, etc. Democracy is a universal ideal for humankind, because it corresponds to the human nature as we explained before.

### *The risks that threaten Tunisia's nascent democracy*

What capacity does Tunisian democracy have to confront crises?

In Tunisia, democracy did not fall from the sky. Democracy was the result of a revolution. This revolution was followed

by the constitution of 2014, which is a democratic constitution and corresponds to the demands posed by the revolution. The problems posed by this new-born democracy arose from a certain number of factors.

The first problem was the un-kept promises of the revolution; the second problem consists of the deficit in the implementation of democracy in our country; and the third problem consists of the economic crisis and the degradation of social conditions.

In this revolution, it is necessary to distinguish two things: dignity and freedom. As far as freedom is concerned, it came quickly. Freedom was easy to acquire: once the dictatorship was overthrown, we were free.

It is very curious, because in Tunisia on January 14th and 15th, the press began to use a certain tone in their publications and everything changed. Just a few days later, all photographs of the deposed president were removed and we started to experience democracy with a certain level of freedom, freedom of the press, freedom to hold elections etc. Tunisia became a country in which one could express oneself, perhaps with a slight excess of freedom. It became a country in which one could watch films that were previously not available in the Arab and Muslim world. It is a country that has fully benefited from freedom. It has done so with elections held in 2011, 2014 and 2019. All this proves that conquering freedom has been a success.

The link between dignity and social justice means that there is no dignity if there is vulnerability. This vulnerability – which is distinct from poverty – does not guarantee real dignity. A dignified man or woman is capable of living a life in acceptable material conditions that do not undermine their condition as human beings. Poverty or vulnerability can result in a loss of dignity and I fear that to a certain extent we have lost that wager. We have a frustrated, disenchanted population and consequently, should this problem involving the economic and financial state of the country and the economic situation of citizens and society's conditions not be resolved, we will embark upon a never-ending cycle of peaceful or violent protests, always demanding social justice. That is the first challenge, the first problem and the most important risk that democracy must address.



The second problem is the deficiency of the democratic experience. The implementation of our democracy is far from being perfect and is, in fact, lacking. It is the deficit of the democratic system that poses a risk – the greatest risk – to our democracy in addition to the un-kept problems of the revolution. Implementing a democratic form of government involves two types of phenomena, which proves that we have not managed the exercising of our democracy well. Society is, in fact, divided. Tunisia is responsible, and the Tunisians are responsible. The political parties are responsible for divisions in our society.

At an ideological level and at a social level, for example, there is a clear divide in society. Tunisia is divided between modernists and conservatives, between those who are religious or those who identify as secular. If these were ideological differences that could be resolved peacefully, it would not pose a problem. However, the problem is that these are profound divisions, and serious ideological ones. Not all ideological divisions are the same. Some are more serious than others, and could result in violence and that poses a risk.

Tunisian democracy must address this risk. The division is not only ideological, but also social. In Tunisia we had a very strong middle class that maintained the balance. Middle class is not a mysterious expression – it is made up of people who work in institutions, teachers, administrators, the police, and people who have hope. Their hope is that by the end of their careers they will have a home, a TV, a car, even if it is second-hand, and a certain level of dignity.

Instead, today we are seeing an impoverishment of the middle class. There is a malaise that is increasingly taking root, and a social divide that is increasingly marked between the elites

and the masses. This division is extremely difficult to manage, firstly because there is a lack of time, and secondly because it could spark violent conflict, which is always a risk in democracy.

However, in this deficit in the implementation of democracy and the social and ideological divisions, there are also the weaknesses of the democratic system itself. While it is true that democracy favors demagogues, it is also true that democracy favors corruption. The democratic system lacks the counter-powers to prevent these intrinsic deviations of democracy from degenerating. They must remain within acceptable limits. Unfortunately, however, these weaknesses of the democratic system are often seen in Tunisia mainly due to the poor performance of the institutions.

Among the signs of weakness of our institutions, we must mainly cite the excesses of the parliamentary system adopted by the Constitution of January 27, 2014. These excesses are manifested several ways: by the discrepancy between the activity of political parties, on the one hand, and the social and economic reality; by the slowness in the formation of successive governments since the legislative elections of October 26, 2014; by the constant government crises; and finally, by the lack of harmony between the two executive powers (the president and the head of government).

Given the complexity and immensity of the economic and social problems experienced by Tunisia, the country is actually living in a situation of accelerated social emergency. These issues include economic growth estimated at 0.8% for the year 2020,[1] runaway inflation, an impoverishment of the middle class due to a constant fall in average annual income,[2]

[1] According to Professor Hachemi Alaya, "2020, Année de tous les dangers pour la Tunisie", Ecoweek, 13th of January, number 1, 2020, p. 8.

[2] Hachemi Alaya, loc. cit., p.2.



a constantly increasing state debt,[3] a clear imbalance in public finances due to a massive recruitment of civil servants during the troika – leading to an unacceptable increase in the wage bill in the state budget – the deficit in the insurance and social security funds, endemic unemployment of more than 15% of the active population, brain drain, and sometimes tragic emigration. Faced with this situation, a large number of political parties responded according to their own interests, using the ordinary partisan techniques of propaganda and manipulation, overbidding, "give and take", and the race for positions of responsibility. These partisan techniques are real barriers to solving the emergency problems of the Tunisian heartland. It is provocative to public opinion when the life of political parties is purely formal and detached from the real problems of society. There is therefore a negative public reaction towards political parties, as evidenced by the presidential elections of September 15 - October 13, 2019, which reveal a clear anti-partisan reaction from the electorate. In addition, the negotiations between the mosaic of political parties represented in Parliament cause excessive slowness in the formation of governments. This was verified both by the formation of the Habib Essid government in 2015, and for that of Youssef Chahed in 2016. The absence of a true parliamentary majority, which is caused by the permanent splitting of partisan coalitions within the assembly and the so-called "tourism of deputies between parties and parliamentary coalitions" leads to chronic government instability. The Habib Essid government was called to life by the President of the Republic despite having no majority in Parliament. But it undermined the "national unity government" that the President of the Republic desired and was obliged to request

[3] The wage bill in 2020 will reach 19 billion dinars, that is to say 40,4% of the total budget estimated at more than 47 billion dinars. Source: L'économiste maghrébin, 25 november 2019, « Budget 2020: Tarek Chérif tire la sonnette d'alarme sur la masse salariale ».

confidence from the national assembly, which rejected it. The Youssef Chahed government, which was re-shuffled twice on September 6, 2016 and November 5, 2018, broke with the Nidaa Tounès party, and then embarked on a policy of collaboration with the Islamist party. That step discredited the Chahed government in the eyes of a fringe of public opinion. Finally, in 2016, under the Essid government, and more seriously in 2018, with the Chahed government, we experienced conflicts between the two heads of the executive, the President of the Republic on one side and the head of government on the other. All this was due to a loss of public confidence in political parties and in the parliamentary game, and more seriously, in relation to the entire representative regime. Two particular examples highlight the difficulties of the political regime in Tunisia.

The first is that a democratic country with a representative assembly has not been able to create a Constitutional Court, which is an essential institution for the balance of our democratic system. Elections for such a council have been cancelled time after time, and we still do not have a Constitutional Court. And yet, such a court is extremely important. The second example is the amendment of the electoral law, which is a totally legitimate undertaking. It is normal for a democracy to defend itself. It defends itself against financial gains, dictatorship, those who praise dictatorship, and candidates who wish to take advantage of newspapers or a TV channel, etc.

Democracy should even defend itself from charitable organizations. I agree that legitimate charities are very useful, but not when they get involved in presidential elections. In 2015 a report was sent by the Independent High Authority for Elections to the Assembly of Representatives of the People to draw attention to the deficiencies of the electoral law, so it could have been changed in time – but it was not.



## *Populism or reform: the path ahead for Tunisia*

There are other, more serious problems, such as corruption, however we have democratized corruption. There is also the problem of social anarchy, another deficiency in our democratic system. Social anarchy and the weakness of the state go hand-in-hand. The city of Tunis that I saw ten or fifteen years ago is unrecognizable. It is not urbanization – it is anarchy; unrestrained construction where once upon a time, there was a very beautiful city. There is also the problem of waste removal. Tunisia, after the revolution, has remained a dirty nation that does not know how to manage its waste. How is it that in Rwanda they have managed to regulate this? They have found solutions. One must invent solutions to be applied against those who pollute, and against the irresponsible managers. I see two paths for the future. Either the route of populism, which we are currently experiencing now to a certain extent, or the rationalization of the parliamentary regime and that of our constitution.

On this basis, I fear for the future of my country, which does not look optimistic. I am told this is populism, but populism itself is the strict application of democracy itself. One must return to the people and, more specifically, to the majority of voters. Is that not a democratic process? Why condemn populism? I condemn populism because such slogans can throw the country into violence. If I criticize populism it is not as a matter of principle, because I believe populism is one of democracy's legitimate and acceptable aspects. Where does the danger of populism lie? It is in its deviations. It is the extreme aspects of populism that are dangerous. If the game of populism is not controlled, it can result in a conservative regression, or even in some form of fascism. The great democracies, dating back to before World War Two, experienced this kind of deviation, such as Germany and Italy. It was Rome that created Europe. It was Roman culture, Roman law, and the Church. Germany and Italy

were the two countries that experienced the deviations of populism, and I hope we will not find ourselves in such a situation of violence and the rejection of others.

However, in Tunisia, the presidential elections of September-October 2019 are cause for concern. The victorious candidate built his electoral campaign on a revolutionary "myth". This "myth", in the anthropological sense, is based on direct democracy, the return to the voice of the people, criticism of the representative system, the discrepancy between the life of political parties, and the needs of the people. Nothing is more legitimate. Obviously, these slogans are likely to influence opinions, especially those of young people, tired by several years of socially inconsistent functioning of the parliamentary system, which is seated on the party system. In other words, the winning candidate wants to present himself as the standard-bearer of the revolutionary myth, in all its depth. This objectively represents a manipulation of the public opinion, coupled with a fundamental contradiction of perspectives.

It is indeed contradictory that an "anti" (anti-party, anti-system, anti-direct democracy) candidate finds himself in a position to take the initiative in forming the government himself in "consultation with parties, coalitions and parliamentary groups". The president is propelled to the head of the party system with coalitions and parliamentary groups whose interaction he must arbitrate. A president who really has anti-partisan, anti-representative, anti-system convictions, therefore logically should not run for office, because that inevitably condemns him to "enter the system" and, under penalty of forfeiture, to fully participate.

As for "manipulation", indeed, to be able to proclaim yourself a faithful interpreter of the revolution or, at least, to pose as a visionary of its intentions and its scope, you must have proven yourself under the dictatorship. Let's not forget that the revolution was essentially an anti-dictatorial revolution. The resistance to the dictatorship had its revolts, its riots, its insurrections, its petitioners, its personalities, its suicides before



December 17, 2010, its opponents by the writing or the word, its parties excluded from the official political game, its victims, its dead, those who gave their time, their comfort, their life – all, so that the dictatorship could end. All political movements ranging from Ennahda to PCOT[4], going through the whole gamut of the political keyboard, paid the right price for the revolution to take place. Without this multifaceted resistance, with all the degrees and nuances of its intensity, the revolution would not have taken place. This revolution did not fall from the sky. It is not due to chance. The collaborators, those who were indifferent, the silent, the "exhorters", should not take advantage of the revolution in any way whatsoever. Revolutionary parachuting can only deceive those who are willing to be deceived without grasping the true meaning of history. Savvy people must not be deceived by these lures. It is paradoxical to see a man who has always stood by the side of resistance and who has even smirked at the slightest solicitation, for example signing a petition of protest, becoming the voice of the revolution and the official interpreter of his message. What wall of resistance did he put his name on? So here is a sickly effect of populism: the building of a big lie to win a tired, discouraged and somewhat unsophisticated electorate. This type of populism will have little chance of succeeding in Tunisia. It will eventually perish from its own contradictions. And Tunisians will quickly realize the falsity of this poorly understood revolutionary myth.

The second path seems to me invincible and involves the rationalization of our constitution. The Tunisian Constitution is a magnificent one, as far as the principles in it are concerned. I have always said so; I took part in drafting it. It is magnificent in its principles and has a generous philosophy, a democratic philosophy, and an open philosophy, with articles such as Number 6, or 49, recognizing freedom of conscience (the only Arab country

[4] Far left party.

that recognizes freedom of conscience). There are many good principles in this constitution, but unfortunately it is poorly implemented at an institutional level. It is a game played by institutions. They are too complex, they divide power and consequently I believe that the best future for us would be to revise the constitution in order to rebalance it. Firstly, to simplify it, and rationalize parliament so as to unite the executive and avoid crises of the executive such as those we have experienced not long ago, or between the head of government and the President of the Republic, and to also rationalize partisan positions through an electoral law or another specific law concerning political parties.

### *Conclusion*

Finally, let me underline two most important remarks. Firstly, we must tackle the most urgent issue: re-establishing social and economic balance. Secondly, re-establishing the state's authority. In a democracy the state must be strong. It cannot be weak. We are in a very paradoxical situation. We apply the democratic system. This same system causes us to experience social crises, political crises, gaps caused by the lack of efficient institutions, and we insist on asking this same democratic system to resolve the problem. It is a contradiction. One cannot ask a regime that is, to a certain extent, responsible for the problems to come and sort out the difficulties we are experiencing. That's why I wish to point out that the democratic system is not a miracle. A democratic regime is not a miracle and, if problems accumulate, it will eventually collapse. It is the law of history, and one can do nothing about it. The democratic state will end up falling into anarchy and return us to a dictatorship. We must thus pay great attention to this and help democracy. It is not democracy that must help us. It is we the citizens who must help democracy to improve, without expecting miracles, because political miracles do not exist.

## Chapter II

# Individual and collective liberties in Tunisia. Constitutional path and Islamization attempt

*Nader Hammami*, University of Carthage

Democracy and human rights defenders around the world have welcomed the new Tunisian constitution that was adopted on 27 January 2014, three years after the revolution that ended the Ben Ali regime and the post-independence system. The new Tunisian constitution is seen by some as a historic step, while other opinions have gone further, calling Tunisia "a model for other peoples who aspire to reform."[1] These opinions are generally based on the fact that the Tunisian constitution has recognized several political freedoms, but above all, individual and collective freedoms.

There are several achievements concerning collective and individual freedoms in the new Tunisian constitution. But it should not be forgotten that Ennahda and other conservative political parties had tried to impose a different draft constitution, before rallying to the version adopted by the National Constitutional Assembly.

The purpose of this article is to recall the conditions under which this constitution was promulgated. It will analyze the impact of the balance of power between the different protagonists in the transition, and will also assess their contributions and the limits of individual and political freedoms in the new constitutional text.

[1] That was the view of the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon (http://www.lemonde.fr/tunisie/thearticle/2014/01/26)

It will also explore the laws and practices that remain in force after despite the formal adoption of these freedoms.

The new Tunisian constitution took three years to emerge, during an extended transition period between the electoral campaign for the National Constitutional Assembly and the adoption of the constitution in January 2014. This phase was marked by dramatic national and international moments that directly influenced the constitutional process. In particular, we can mention the assassination of the constituent Mohamed Brahmi on the 25th of July in 2013, preceded by the assassination of the left-wing leader Chokri Belaïd on the 6th of February 2013, and also after the rise of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt, which influenced the attitudes of the Islamist party Ennahda, and as a result, had a majority in the National Constitutional Assembly.

The debates during this period were marked by the balance of power between the partisans of a timid secular project, who were inhibited by the fear of losing Tunisia's modern achievements, and the partisans of an Islamist project who relied on the fear of violent Salafists.

All of the draft constitutions took greater account of the demands of Islamist and conservative movements than those of civil society and democratic forces. In some drafts, freedoms were sacrificed in favor of Sharia law. This was justified on the basis of "state identity" as the conservative movements construed Article 1, which inherited from the first Tunisian constitution after independence: Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign state; its religion is Islam, its language is Arabic and its regime is the Republic. This article was always a battlefield for conflicts of interpretation.

Even before the presentation of the projects of the candidate parties, a debate took place between those who called for a clear separation between religion and state and those who demanded an express reference to the Sharia as a source of law. The first article was written under the impetus of Habib



Bourguiba, Prime Minister until July 25, 1957 (date of the declaration of the Republic) and played on the ambivalence of its terms, allowing the State to secularize while maintaining a clear reference to Islam. But this article was a real double-edged sword because it offered Islamists an unexpected gift. Contrary to the reading of Bourguiba and the secularists who considered Islam as the religion of the majority of Tunisian people and not of the State, the conservatives always said that what is discussed in this article is the institution of Islam as the religion of the State, and that it is necessary to draw the implications at all levels – legislative and cultural.[2]

It is quite clear that the Tunisian revolution freed all those who were stifled by the dictatorship: from the voices that aspired to more freedom to those that sought to impose a theocracy that challenged all the modern achievements of society. The abrogation of the 1959 Constitution, which recognized, among other things, the freedom of belief and expression and did not refer the legislation to any religious norm, reopened the debate on questions relating to the status of the Islamic norm in relation to the State. It questioned legislation, morals, individual and collective conduct: is it a norm that is binding only on those who adhere to it or should it be established as a constitutional principle to which everything must be subject, the State, the law and individual and collective conduct, in all fields, as the followers of the most fundamentalist readings and the most rigorous traditions have begun to demand loud and clear? The eruption of Salafist movements calling for the "restoration of the Caliphate", the "application of Sharia law", the repeal of "ungodly laws" and the "re-Islamization" of the state and society by all means, including violence, surprised those

[2] Belaïd, C, "L'article 1: 'la Tunisie est un Etat libre, indépendant et souverain; sa religion est l'islam…" in *Les dispositions générales de la Constitution, Actes du colloque de commémoration du cinquantenaire de la promulgation de la Constitution du 1er juin* 1959, Hans Seidel Stiftung, Tunis, 2010, p. 34.

who lived on the idea of a "Tunisian exception" under the sign of "modernity", secularization, "tolerance", openness to the century and to the world, recognition of women's rights, etc.

Tunisia has experienced, especially between 2011 and 2013, attempts at Islamization on two levels: the societal level and the constitutional level.[3] On the first level, Tunisia experienced several violent attacks against academics, artists, television channels, human rights defenders and trade unions. At the same time, there was a takeover of mosques by the Salafists, the opening of "schools" known as "Koranic schools", the arrangement outside the legal framework known as "customary marriage" (according to the *'Urf*), the spectacular reception of several Wahhabi preachers and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, etc... But this level of Islamization was well accompanied by a second constitutional level led by the dominant Islamist party.

We can, by way of example, refer to the first draft of the constitution published in August 2012, where we read in article 2 of chapter 2: "The State guarantees freedom of conscience and the exercise of worship; and prohibits any attack on sacred religions". Further on, in chapter 9 devoted to the "final provisions", there is a draft article according to which "No constitutional revision can infringe" on 6 articles of the constitution, the first of which reads: "Islam as the religion of the State". The second draft constitution of 1 June 2013 kept the same proposal in its article 141.

In these projects, two major problems arise: the first is related to the problem of the "attack on the sacred religious", and the second is the consideration of Islam as the religion of the state. Moreover, the first draft of the constitution makes no mention of freedom of conscience or freedom of thought, and there is no reference to the Universal Declaration of Human

[3] For more details, see Ben Achour, Y, *Tunisie, une révolution en pays d'Islam*, Tunis, Cérès Editions, 206, pp. 316-323.



Rights. The draft constitution, as we can read in its preamble, is based first of all "On the basis of the constants of Islam and its aims characterized by openness and tolerance, and noble human values. Inspired by the cultural heritage of the Tunisian people that accumulated over successive historical eras, by its reformist movement based on the elements of its Arab-Muslim identity and on the universal achievements of human civilization, and by attachment to the national achievements that it has been able to achieve". There are too many vague references to the universality of rights and freedom and the omnipresence of the question of identity.

Faced with this situation, the salutary role has become a requirement. It is the mobilization of civil society committed to the defense and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as the mobilizations of the Summer of 2013, that reversed the balance of power in favor of an end of transition that considers the democratic aspirations of the revolution. Thanks to these mobilizations, the National Constituent Assembly was no longer the framework for the drafting of the constitution and the completion of the transition. A new body was imposed: the national dialogue under the aegis of four civil society organizations supported by the various organized expressions of civil society and by daily demonstrations in the streets. Within the framework of the national dialogue, the various draft constitutions presented by the Islamists were set aside – but the Islamists have not totally abandoned their project.

The new Tunisian constitution, like any constitution drawn up in a context of transition and democratic confrontation between conflicting projects, reflects the balance of power that presided at the time of its drafting. This applies to the constitution as a whole as well as to the articles dealing with the issue of individual and collective freedoms. The points of view of both camps are reflected. Article 6 of the Constitution of January 2014 is an example, and reads as follows: "The State is the

guardian of religion. It guarantees freedom of conscience and belief and the free exercise of worship; it is the guarantor of the neutrality of mosques and places of worship with respect to any partisan instrumentalization". The State undertakes to disseminate the values of moderation and tolerance, to protect the sacred and to prohibit any infringement thereof. It also undertakes to prohibit and combat calls to *takfir* [accusations of apostasy] and incitement to violence and hatred. To some, the article grants the guarantee of freedom of conscience, the free exercise of worship, the prohibition and combating of calls to *takfir*. To others, it grants the protection of religion and the sacred, and the prohibition of any attack on it. Mosques and places of worship are declared neutral and free from any partisan instrumentalization, but this does not mean, as the Islamists later recalled, that imams may not preach politically.

The constitutionalization of individual and collective freedoms in Tunisia is an important achievement. It is a lever for combating violations of fundamental rights, for repealing the laws and regulations that hamper them, for denouncing and prosecuting those who violate them and for establishing full citizenship without discrimination. However, the ambiguities of the Constitution, maintained under pressure from Islamists and fanatical circles, allow them to exert pressure in the opposite direction in the name of protecting religion and prohibiting any attack on the morals, identity, or what they consider to be sacred. The fight for fundamental freedoms and human rights must be pursued with firmness, lucidity and vigilance, and must be based on the dissemination of a democratic culture, which constitutes its indispensable foundation. The Islamists have certainly made concessions that acknowledge the democratic demands of civil society and the pressure to incorporate references to international human rights texts. But it is inaccurate to attribute to them the advances of the new constitution that they have arguably only accepted under duress and



coercion. In the worst case scenario, they might revoke with one hand what they have conceded with the other as soon as they have the means to do so.

Tunisia has made great political progress since 2011, especially at the institutional level. But such progress would be more difficult to achieve at the level of people's mentalities which are forged by heavy and deep cultural and historical accumulations.[4] In fact, "the great depths of society in terms of collective psychology, culture, sensibilities and tastes, the majority conception of belief, virility and femininity, family and domestic affairs, cannot be shaken by the simple advent of a political revolution. A political revolution is sudden, noisy, spectacular, mobilizing crowds, but can have no noticeable effect on culture.[5]"

Further still, the history of revolutions teaches us that a political revolution with innovative slogans can provoke counter-progressive reactions and thus reinforce conservative tendencies that are socially in the majority – of which cultural identity is the essential pillar.

[4] Ferjani, M.C., "Liberté de conscience dans le champ religieux islamique," in *La liberté de conscience dans le champ religieux, Document de travail no.4 de l'IIEDH, Université de Fribourg*, pp. 75-83.

[5] Ben Achour, Y., *Tunisie, une révolution en pays d'Islam*, p. 113.

Chapter III

# The only game left in town? Tunisia Ennahda's strategic weakness

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On April 4th, 2020 the Tunisian parliament approved the decree law that has enabled the sitting prime minister Elyes Fakhfakh to rule by decree for two months. The Fakhfakh government was sworn in on February 27th, with 129 votes in favor and 77 against, four months after the latest legislative elections. Prime minister Fakhfakh comes from Ettakatol, the social-democratic party which composed the troika with Ennahda and CPR between 2011-2014. His name was proposed by the new president of the Republic, Kaïs Saïed, also elected late last year, after the candidates supported by Ennahda were turned down by the other parties. Kaïs Saïed, after winning the second round of the presidential elections with 73%, now enjoys even higher popularity. The combination of the diminishing electoral support for Ennahda and the president's lack of a political party have strengthened the de facto presidentialization dynamics in post-revolutionary Tunisia as Kaïs Saïed now acts act as kingmaker among key political parties.

Ennahda presents a rare example of an Islamist group that transformed itself into an Islamic democratic party, but it is no exaggeration to argue that it now finds itself in a position of apparent weakness.[1] First and foremost, its electoral success

[1] A. Hawthorne and S. Grewal, *Better late than never: Tunisia's New Government Takes the Reins*, March 24, 2020. Last access September 2020. https://pomed.org/qa-better-late-than-never-tunisias-new-government-takes-the-reins/

has shrunk from a staggering 37% in 2011 (89 seats), to 27% three years later (69 seats) and only 18% of the votes in 2019 (52 seats) – despite the implosion of its main competitor Nidaa Tounes. Some scholars argue that the progressive diminution of Islamist parties' seats within a pluralist system is to be expected, and so Tunisia, for once, rather than being an outlier testifies to that pattern.[2]

It was not only Ennahda that lost votes: there was general disaffection with formal political participation as epitomised by the reduced electoral turnout.[3] Voter participation peaked in 2014 at 67% for the legislative elections and 60% for the presidential contest. In 2019, despite two million more Tunisians were added to electoral lists, the overall participation rate was lower: 41% voted in the legislative elections and less than 50% at the presidential elections. The current parliament is the most fragmented and polarised legislature of the post-revolutionary period. This could be a sign of a more mature democratic dynamic, which does not rigidly depend on consensus-seeking among the key political parties. Consolidation of the political system in the absence of macro-economic stability, however, heightens the risk of systemic stalemate, as took place in 2013 – or even of destabilization. The government coalition includes neoliberal and leftist parties, and the negotiation for loans from external donors and international institutions is certain to create internal tensions.

Secondly, Ennahda failed to create a grand coalition or to rally a national unity government behind its candidate. The party tried to form a coalition government led by Habib Jemli, an independent whom many considered too close to Ennahda. In that

[2] C. Kurzman, D. Turkoglu, *After the Arab spring: do Muslims vote Islamic now?*, October 2015. Last access September 2020. https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/after-the-arab-spring-do-muslims-vote-islamic-now/

[3] IFES Election Guide, *Country Profile: Tunisia*. Last access September 2020. https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/217/



respect, the success of President Saïed to convince most parties to rally around Fakhfakh underscored Ennahda's relative weakness.

Thirdly, in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, Prime Minister Fakhfakh invoked Article 70 of the 2014 Constitution that allows him to issue decree laws, bypassing parliament for two months. President Saïed has invoked Article 80 of the Constitution to extend the curfew into a lockdown beginning March 21st, and expanding presidential powers to meet the special circumstances. Within a convoluted semi-presidential system, the prerogatives of the President of the Republic are intended to check and balance those of the Prime Minister who embodies the executive power of government.[4] But this recent twist signals that the Presidency of the Republic intends to share some legislative functions during the emergency phase.[5] This could lead to intra-executive infighting. Tunisia has primarily dealt with the crisis through a strategy of anticipation, allowing it to remain within the limits of its public health infrastructure.[6] For better or for worse, Ennahda has remained on the side-lines during the ongoing health emergency. This could mean that the party has limited leverage and political clout or it could be an indicator of a medium-term adaptation and transformation strategy in line with the party's tradition of being an Islamist party unlike any other.

For almost a decade now, Ennahda has taken responsibility for government and shared the political limelight with competing parties, such as Nidaa Tounes. It did so, in part, to assuage fears

[4] N. Mekki, *The political crisis in Tunisia*, December 7, 2018. Last access September 2020. http://constitutionnet.org/news/political-crisis-tunisia-it-consequence-semi-presidential-arrangement

[5] M. Guetat, *Tunisia and the Coronavirus: the Reality of a poor Governance*, April 9, 2020. Last access September 2020. https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/tunisia-and-coronavirus-reality-poor-governance-25671

[6] Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, *Covid19 in Tunisia*, April 9, 2020. Last access September 2020. http://middleeastdirections.eu/new-blog-post-covid19-in-tunisia-beyond-the-health-crisis-a-socio-economic-challenge-nedra-cherif/

of political dominance and entrenchment in the political system, thereby trying to anticipate accusations of hegemonic behaviour or hegemonic aspirations. Now, the pandemic and the coming global recession will present a long moment of crisis for the young and lonely North African democracy. The upcoming challenges will prove too great for any single political leader and political party to address. Ennahda, by having let president Saïed impose his candidate as prime minister, having had its Health Minister adopt and implement a wise anticipation strategy, is playing its cards strategically. The country already needed to borrow 3 billion dollars in 2020 to meet ongoing spending commitments, a number which will inevitably increase exposing the country's vulnerabilities in financing itself internationally.[7]

One of Ennahda's vulnerabilities is the lack of visible alternative to Rached Ghannouchi's leadership. This increases the likelihood of internal conflict in the leadership contest within the party were its founder-leader to step down or die in the near future. Throughout the party's history, Ghannouchi has held the party together and has managed to navigate across three main kinds of tensions.[8]

The first relates to different understandings of ideological purity: should Islamisation be the goal or the means of political activity? Different visions on this issue have been articulated within the party in the early post-revolutionary period. This was especially the case in 2012-2013, during the constitution-making phase. Then, varying interpretations of the role of Islam within the new constitution emerged and risked derailing not just the evolution of Ennahda, but of the country's constitutional trajectory.

[7] France24, *Tunisia names new coalition government bringing an end to political crisis*, February 20, 2020. Last access September 2020. https://www.france24.com/en/20200220-tunisia-names-new-coalition-government-bringing-an-end-to-political-crisis

[8] R. McCarthy, *When Islamists Lose: The Politicization of Tunisia's Ennahda Movement, The Middle East Journal*, Summer 2018. Last access September 2020. https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/mei/mei/2018/00000072/00000003/art00002



The second tension has to do with the strategic choices that the party made, from the rehabilitation of people or supporters from the *ancien regime* to its alliance with its main rival, Nidaa Tounes, after the 2014 elections. In those instances, Ghannouchi represented a coalescing figure who convinced the party's key bodies that the stability of the country was in Ennahda's best long-term interest. The result was the Ghannouchi-Essebsi condominium and the consensus-driven politics that has both stabilized the country and prevented necessary reforms and change. The looming prospect of an Egyptian scenario, where the Muslim Brotherhood was undemocratically removed from power and violently repressed in 2013, as well as Tunisia's own history of persecution under Ben Ali after the 1989 elections, have acted as a powerful reminder of the risks of majoritarian forms of government.[9]

The third tension revolves around organization. At Ennahda's annual convention in 2016, the party decided to separate *da'wa* (preaching) from the political activity of the party. Even more importantly, the party itself evolved from an Islamist into a self-declared Muslim Democratic party. This historic decision was approved by 80% of the party delegates and represented an important break from the past and a qualitative change in the party's trajectory[10]. A similar debate had occurred in Islamist circles in 1981, when those who favored carrying out Islamic-inspired political activity created the MTI (*Mouvement pour la Tendance Islamiste* – renamed as Ennahda in 1988. Those who supported religious activism kept the debate alive over the historical legacy of Islam, some of which was elaborated in the leftist

[9] S. Hamid, *Temptations of power*, Oxford University Press, 2019, May 22, 2014. Last access September 2020. https://global.oup.com/academic/product/temptations-of-power-9780199314058?cc=it&lang=en&

[10] P. Marzo, F. Cavatorta, *Le voyage d'Ennahda*, Afkar, Hiver 2016/2017. Last access September 2020. https://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxius-adjunts/afkar/afkar-52/afkar52_Marzofr.pdf/

Islamic publication *15/21*. This was in line with a broader trend of politicisation: more resources were dedicated to electoral campaigns and the formation of party-like structures.[11] This intensified after the 2014 elections and the rise of Nidaa Tounes.

What we are observing today is the winding down of all the three above-mentioned tensions. Firstly, in ideological terms, there are pressing challenges for Ennahda to redefine itself. The only political competitor with religious credentials is the Al Karama coalition, which holds 19 seats (compared to Ennahda's 52 seats). Al Karama's reputation for extremism however, has kept it out of governing coalitions and has prevented it from playing a kingmaker role. Despite therefore a non-monopolistic position within the religious camp, the perception of Al Karama coalition as being extremist, significantly limits its chances to enlarge its constituency.

Ennahda, while losing almost half of its votes between 2014 and 2019, remains the largest single party in parliament. This has been reinforced by the implosion of Nidaa Tounes, the high degree of volatility of the latest round of elections and the corresponding fragmentation of the parliament.[12] Ennahda's self-identification as a Muslim Democratic party might have lost it some votes to Islamist parties with a more radical image, such as Al Karama and Errahma (which once held 4 seats but currently has only two). If the ideological dimension remains dormant, then the longtime accusations against Ennahda of having a double discourse and hiding its agenda of Islamisation might in time subside.

Lastly, on the front of political strategy, despite its failure to forge a grand coalition, Ennahda will benefit from playing a less visible role by not being associated with neither the current Prime Minister nor the President of the Republic. The two prominent politicians will also be overseeing Tunisia's political and socio-economic response to the pandemic. Economic forecasts offer a gloomy picture with a loss of 4% of GDP and 400,000 jobs.[13] Both Prime Minister Fakhfakh and President Kaïs Saïed have invoked prerogatives enabling them to take action to counter the ongoing challenges. This battle will most likely see no winners but it will expose long-term vulnerabilities. Among these is the limited number of intensive care beds for the whole country and their highly unequal geographic distribution – mostly in the capital and the coast, i.e. reflecting the historically stratified socio-economic cleavage. The diminished number of available nurses and doctors who have recently fled the country for lack of prospects is another sore point. This battleground could spell the beginning of the end of one or more political careers. Ennahda, strategically, has opted not to appear or be in the driving seat, and will likely avoid most of the blame and reap benefits once the worst part of the pandemic and economic crisis will be over. These unintended events might just save Ennahda internally, where dissent has intensified in the past six years and has reached a new climax since last year's poor results in the presidential and legislative election. That would be further proof of strategic success and leadership that has allowed the party to survive and remain the only significant political force in town.

[11] Please refer to footnote 8.

[12] Please refer to footnote 8.

[13] Arab News, *Tunisia tourism could lose $1.4bn, as government eyes bond sale*, April 15, 2020. Last access September 2020. https://www.arabnews.com/node/1659486/business-economy

Chapter IV

# Political liberalism: what remains 10 years after the revolution?

*Federica Zoja*, Journalist

The Tunisian liberal front is having difficulty regaining political momentum and cohesion after suffering defeat during the 2019 election cycle. Following the death of President Béji Caïd Essebsi in July 2019, parliamentary elections were relegated to period between the first and second rounds of the presidential vote.[1] This deviated from initial plans to hold them in late autumn at the end of the presidential election marathon.[2] This implied a reversal of the institutional and constitutional dynamic between parliament and the presidency. This does not reflect the State's actual power balance and it has the effect of penalizing more traditional actors.

In a general climate of rampant disaffection and disillusionment towards politics among the public, the liberal parties struggled present themselves to the voters as a united front. Prime Minister Youssef Chahed abandoned Nidaa Tounès altogether in 2019. [3]

[1] Before the Jasmine Revolution of 2011, the Tunisian parliament had a bicameral structure. The current assembly, consisting of 217 deputies, took the place of the 2011 Constituent Assembly in October 2014.

[2] The two rounds of the Tunisian presidential elections took place on the 15th of September and the 13th of October 2019, while the parliamentary election took place on the 6th of October 2019.

[3] Nidaa Tounès, translated as the Movement of the Call of Tunisia, is a secular and modernist party founded in 2012, on the initiative of long-time politician Béji Caïd Essebsi, then Prime Minister. In the 2014 presidential elections, the party supported the candidacy of Essebsi himself who then won the election. Nidaa won

Dozens of members of parliament protested the mismanagement of the party and accused the Essebsi family of cronyism.[4]

In the meantime, a new political initiative was taking shape: Tahya Tounès. The new party was created to defend the values of liberalism and secularism without the cumbersome shadow of the presidential clan. In June 2019, Prime Minister Chahed assumed leadership of the party and brought with him a range of personalities from a variety of political backgrounds.[5] The encouraging electoral predictions that liberals enjoyed in early summer 2019, however, were not reflected at the ballot box: Tahya Tounès won 14 seats and Nidaa Tounès fared worse, with only 3. In the outgoing assembly, by contrast, Nidaa had managed to hold on to only 26 seats of the 86 originally won in 2014. This political hemorrhage seemed to characterize all 2019 leading up to the electoral "funeral". Three other minor parties of modernist inspiration were also up for election: al-Badil Ettounsi (Tunisian Alternative, established by former prime minister Mehdi Jomaa, won 3 seats), Afeq Tounès (Tunisian Horizons, a social-liberal party, won 2), and Machrou Tounès (Project for Tunisia, born from Mohsen Mazrouk's departure from Nidaa, won 4).

Overall, the parties belonging to the modernist political wing garnered a total of 26 seats, that is, little over ten percent of the total 217 seats. This was a fiasco compared to its triumph

the parliamentary majority in the political elections of 25 October 2014, beating the leading party, Ennahda (moderate Islamists) winning 86 seats, compared to Ennahda's 69, out of a total of 217.

[4] Following a series of misunderstandings between the Prime Minister, Chahed, and the President of the Republic, Chahed clashed bitterly with the son of the president Hafedh Essebsi, then leader of the party since 2018. In hindsight, we can say that this was suicidal for the liberal front as it had the effect of gutting Nidaa Tounès as well as the executive of political vigor and credibility in a moment of serious socio-economic crisis.

[5] Tahya Tounès, translated as Hooray for Tunisia, was founded on January 27th 2019. Over the course of the following months, in addition to absorbing those that had left Nidaa, it has welcomed representatives of the *dusturian* current (from *dustur*, the Arabic for constitution) as well as republicans, socialists, and communists.



just five years earlier. For some Tunisian liberals, the 2019 elections were a tragedy that can be remedied only by a profound revision of the post-revolutionary economic and social policies that proved so ruinous. The political system crumbled under the weight of so many parties and became unstable. This was the context in which Tahya Tounès's 14 seats were decisive to shore up the shaky majority of national unity by entering into the governing coalition.

## *The Fakhfakh government and the liberal contribution*

When Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh, a prominent member of the Ettakatol party, set sail within a sea of economic and political revivals, he was able to contruct a cabinet of 32 members (30 ministers and 2 undersecretaries).[6] The government included ministers from the Islamist party, Ennahda (Rebirth, the majority party in Parliament with 54 deputies out of 217), 3 members of the social democratic Attayar Democratii (Democratic Current with 22 deputies), 2 from Haraka ashShaab (People's Movement with 15 deputies in Parliament), 2 from Tahya Tounès (with 14 members), 1 belonging to al-Badil Ettounsi (Tunisian Alternative, with 3 members) 1 from Nidaa Tounès (as mentioned above, with 3 members) and 17 independents.

This was a fragile cabinet, with the aim of pursuing what Fakhfakh called "the good of the nation". Fakhfakh was endorsed by President Kaïs Saïd on a personal basis and not as a reflection of his political weight. In the current Assembly of Representatives, Ettakatol cannot even boast one deputy.

[6] In full, the Democratic Forum for Work and Freedoms, established in 1994 but only recognized in 2002, led by radiologist Mustapha Ben Jafar. Almost 5 months after the election on the 6th of October, after the rejection of the Habib Jemli government, the Assembly approved the team proposed by the newly designated prime minister, Elyes Fakhfakh, on the 27th of February 2020.

With regard to the liberal question, however, the government entrusted as many as four ministries to modernist parties despite their electoral weakness. There has been no reorganization of the liberal front. On the contrary, Machrou Tounès and Afek Tounès, both liberal initiatives, voted against Fakhfakh's government of national consensus. They instead sought out rapprochements with the populists from Qalb Tounès, with the conservative islamists of al-Karama (Dignity) and the free desturians (constitutionalists), that were fashioning themselves in the image of one of Tunisia's founding fathers, Habib Bourguiba.[7]

The priorities indicated by the Tunisian Prime Minister at the time of his inauguration did not appear to diverge from those outlined in 2016 by his predecessor, Prime Minister Youssef Chahed. That is, they seemed to reflect the same priorities that were espoused by modernizing forces in the aftermath of the revolution. The to-do list is long: establishing security, improving purchasing power, price control, combatting smuggling and corruption, revitalizing the economy through structural reforms, reducing the trade deficit and protecting the national economy, mobilizing additional financial resources, solving the crisis in the mining basin and resuming the production of phosphates, and the implementation of mechanisms to find solutions to workers' problems on construction sites and in schools.

In the meanwhile, in March 2020, a dozen deputies who entered the Assembly of the Representatives of the People under the banner of Qalb Tounès abandoned the party and expressed their intention to create a national bloc on behalf of secular, progressive, liberal values within the parliament. It is

[7] Translated as 'Heart of Tunisia', Qalb Tounès was founded by media tycoon Nabil Karoui in May 2019. It is one of the leading parties that was excluded from Fakhfakh's executive having nevertheless won 38 seats in Parliament. In fact, it was never asked to join the cabinet. As it is, the second largest political force in Tunisia seems to have been ostracized.



conceivable therefore, that the liberal centrist faction may yet revive over time as it attracts exiles of differing origins.

For the purpose of understanding the liberal role, both in Parliament and in the new cabinet, it is useful to look at the appointment of Slim Azzabi, who founded Tahya Tounès with former Prime Minister Chahed, as Minister for Development, International Cooperation and Investments. This ministry is a strategic position within the executive, confirming the trust placed in the modernist parties, as well as the international outlook of the political establishment – even though the electorate did not seem to place the same level of trust in that wing of political leadership. Ennahda, the party with the largest share of votes, was entrusted with ministries with a more "internal" orientation, such as Transport, Health and Education and Research.

## *The results of the Tunisian modernists: between reality and perception*

The liberal-Islamist economic recipe for Tunisia has produced weak foundations and poor prospects in the absence of structural reforms to the production model.[8] The cut in subsidies and the devaluation of the Dinar, as required by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as a *sine qua non* condition for its loan, have stagnated the economic climate and seemed to have worsened the social climate. Economic indicators from the end of 2019 were foreboding: economic growth was at only 1 percent, debt rose above 80 percent of GDP, unemployment

[8] In the period following the revolution, Nidaa Tounès and Ennahda governed jointly, with alternating equilibriums on the national and regional fronts. The last government led by Chahed enjoyed more support among the Islamists rather than the liberals due to the ongoing conflicts within Nidaa.

averaged 15 percent with peaks of 40 percent in the most disadvantaged areas, and inflation increased by 7 percent.[9]

Above all, the ability to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) has not improved in the last five years. According to the Tunisian Foreign Investment Promotion Agency, in FDI decreased by more than 7 percent in 2019 compared to the previous year, with the Greater Tunis area still receiving the lion's share with respect to the rest of the country. This illustrates the persistent and abysmal disparity between the capital and the rest, between the urbanized coast and the agricultural (and starved) heartland. It is also an indicator of how the major international players view the Tunisian context as unreliable or disadvantageous for investment.

The data for the Tunisian tourism sector at the end of 2019 is more encouraging: more stable overall security has led to an increase in overnight stays by foreigners of 11 percent over the previous years.

Additionally, and in retrospect, the public perception of the work accomplished by the Chahed government, the longest-lived coalition of the post revolution period, is uncharitable. In a survey conducted by Sigma Conseil asking Tunisians to enumerate "the main results accomplished by the government in 2019", 54 percent responded "none", compared to 18.9 percent responding that the government had "restored security" and 11.5 responded "the organization of successful elections."[10]

[9] After an encouraging increase in economic growth of +2.8% in 2018, 2019 saw a significant slow-down to an average of +1%. These indicators will be met with difficulty in 2020, due to the Coronavirus pandemic (data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, which already reported a decline in the last quarter of the year to +0.8%). Sigma Conseil remains more optimistic, which estimated a growth of +1.4% for 2019, leaving open the possibility of some growth in 2020 (+2.2%).

[10] Open Sigma, January 2020.



## *The best of enemies*

The political axis that withstood the initial, tumultuous years after the overthrow of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, that is, the axis formed by the moderate Islamists and the liberals, has reached the end of its first decade of hobbling tandem governments.[11] Tunisian politics' two best enemies never let an opportunity slide to limit their counterpart's powers. This was perhaps best represented recently, as the Covid-19 national emergency was in full swing. The Tahya Tounès party attempted to strengthen the prerogatives of Prime Minister Fakhfakh (a Social Democrat) by subtracting influence from the President of the Assembly, Rached Ghannouchi (leader of Ennahda). By invoking Article 70 of the Constitution, Parliament may delegate the Prime Minister the power to issue decrees in emergency situations such as the Coronavirus pandemic. It is worth noting that Article 70 was designed for times of war and necessitates approval by three fifths of the deputies in the Assembly and may not last longer than two months.

A segment of the Tunisian press interpreted this as an attempt not so much to "free" the country from the epidemic, but rather a way to liberate the prime minister from the unwieldy bonds of the legislative branch.[12] The other side, however, denounced the move as a democratic backsliding, arguing that the still fragile republic could be swept away by authoritarian sympathizers.

A personal relationship between the two political leaders, Rached Ghannouchi and Béji Caïd Essebsi was at the basis

[11] After 23 years of uncontested power President Ben Ali was deposed on the 24th of January 2011 by a popular uprising. The *Raïs*, and some of his family members, left Tunisia for Saudi Arabia, where he was granted political asylum.

[12] On Wednesday the 25th of March, the independent newspaper *Le Temps* published the perceptive headline "Now, free Fakhfakh!" above a cartoon version of a vaguely disoriented Rached Ghannouchi. In front of him, a citizen wearing a medical mask holds up a sign reading: "Free Fakhfakh!".

of the political pact between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounès – a historic compromise that guaranteed the integrity of the State on the brink of civil war. Their relationship was founded on mutual respect that was nonetheless put to the test by years of shared management of public affairs. The Tunisian press attempted to reconstruct the reasons for the disaffection and managed to re-create the story's final chapter. On the one hand, the Islamist party lost presidential favor after the Tunis district attorney's office hypothesized that leaders of Ennahda bore some responsibility in the political assassinations of Mohamed Brahmi and Chokri Belaïd and for the recruitment Tunisian volunteers to fight alongside the Islamic State.[13] On the other hand, Rached Ghannouchi never made a secret of his disappointment, which later turned into resentment towards Essebsi, for rejecting the appointment of political advisors of Islamist origin to his secretariat. Nevertheless, the advance of conservative and populist movements could constitute a lever for the revival of a compromise between the Islamists and the liberals, as well as the opening of a new space for dialogue at the center of the political arena. The rise of an aggressive enemy can sometimes have a miraculously cohesive influence on rival parties.

### *The liberal revival of the democratic and reformist path*

As highlighted by the long election campaign of 2019, liberal parties in Tunisia have focused mainly on economic and financial matters while omitting equally other core issues that are equally critical to the survival of the democratic project. The Assembly of the People's Representatives has not yet chosen

[13] General Secretary and spokesperson for the Movement of Democratic Patriots, Belaïd was killed on the 6th of February 2013 and Brahmi, leader of the People's Movement, was killed on the 25th of July 2013.



its quota of members to the Constitutional Court, preventing the court from exercising its duties laid out in the 2014 Constitution. Other institutions are also unable to fulfill their mandates due to vacant appointments, such as the Commission for Human Rights and the Commission on Corruption. This means, for example, that oppressive laws regarding freedom of speech are still in vigor since no supervisory institution has been able to intercede.[14] Even the work of the Commission on Justice and Dignity, created to investigate human rights violations that took place between 1953 and 2013, was not supported by the liberal front. The liberal voices have not been able to advance a bill on gender equality in matters of inheritance, which is still stuck in the parliament.

The political debate over citizens' fundamental rights and freedoms, the protection of minorities, and the implementation of the 2014 Constitution are currently on the agendas of NGOs, unions, associations, activists, and intellectuals – but strangely, they are not on the agenda of the modernist parties.

This also applies to more pressing issues. During the Coronavirus epidemic, in March 2020, a proposal circulated that would grant house arrest or full amnesty to prisoners convicted of minor crimes (including crimes of opinion). No party, and above all no liberal party, has spoken publicly on the issue nor has it given any sign of taking on the task.

Tunisian liberals have been unable to provide concrete answers to social and economic grievances and have been deaf to the political ones. They now face an existential challenge and the increasingly tangible risk of being swept away, perhaps by a new revolutionary wave, ten years after the Jasmine Revolution.

[14] Law Decree 115 on Freedom of the Press dates to November 2011: it liberalizes the legal framework in which the written media operates. The legislation, therefore, exists, but there is no supervisory body to oversee it.

# Part II

# Social Transformations

Chapter V

# The political management of violent extremism in Tunisia

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On January 23rd, 2020, in the presidential Palace in Carthage, the President of the Tunisian Republic, Kaïs Saïed, received six orphan children repatriated from Libya. Their parents had died as members of jihadist groups during an American bombardment of Misrata in 2016. Since then these children had been in the care of the Libyan Red Crescent before being returned to Tunisia. This event resulted in a political debate questioning the meaning of this presidential decision to welcome children of parents accused of belonging to what is perceived to be a terrorist organisation.

This reception has led to a singular political situation, since few countries have repatriated their citizens who were defeated in the war against Islamic State. When they have been repatriated, no head of states publicized their arrival. In Tunisia, the debate concerning the return of jihadists has been met with unanimous resistance from the political class since the fall of the Islamic State. This issue has often been linked to terrorist acts that have occurred on Tunisian soil since the Revolution. At no time has this debate allowed for the broader participation of Tunisians. It has been restricted to a political context limited to groups of representatives with a routine lexicon used as a source of political instrumentalization. Welcoming back the children of jihadists is based on a new policy that is emerging from the current president, who has been acting outside

traditional policies since the plebiscite with which he won the 2019 October elections.[1]

The debate on terrorism is one of the issues experiencing a major shift in the current political climate. The president's speech marked a rift with current security policies toward radicalisation that are predominant in the West.[2] His speech combined state paternalism – these were children of the Republic – and a humanitarian aspect that considers children as the victims of political conflicts with multiple and complex responsibilities.[3] The president seemed to be suggesting that psychological and social care should take place within a political framework, symbolized by the State as a sovereign entity. "We do not wish to make a business of the battle against radicalisation, as occurred in France"[4], stated a member of the National Commission for the Fight against Terrorism. Rather than proceed with the creation of a special police force and detention centres, administrative surveillance mechanisms and "de-radicalisation," the state proposes a set of therapeutic measures with integration from above, to then allow society to assume responsibility. This can be achieved once the stigma is lifted and the rapid reintegration of these children into their families in Tunisia becomes a priority.

The acknowledgment of these children is intertwined with other issues related to the structural causes of social breakdown, including the existence of vulnerable populations and problems

[1] Kaïs Saïed, a retired university professor, was elected President of the Tunisian Republic on October 13th, 2019. Kaïs Saïed's election, with a 55% turnout that was the highest in the last three elections held, was the result of him receiving over 2.7 million votes. Voting against the second Nabil Karoui, found guilty on July 8th 2019 of money-laundering, play a significant role in ensuring Kaïs Saïed's popularity.

[2] Montassir Sakhi, "Naissance de la Radicalisation et du sujet musulman dans le traitement du terrorisme en France », PREMIO: excellence; hors-série no 2, University of Montréal. Faculty of Arts and Science. Department of anthropology, 2019 http://hdl.handle.net/1866/21659

[3] Pierre Legendre, Le crime du caporal Lortie, Paris, Fayard, 1989

[4] https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/reportages/tunisie-les-islamistes-armes-sont-ils-toujours-une-menace



linked to strikes and to economic development. In Tunisia, the evolution of violent extremism has been inextricably linked to establishing a "terrorism" category. When actions no longer belong to this category and become events linked to a collective responsibility, then the perception of radicalism in society declines. Hence, the argument goes, this perception is directly linked to the manner in which violent extremism is dealt with.

Acknowledging the suffering and the vulnerability of the young in Tunisia impacts political extremism and diminishes its radicalism. Permanent changes on the Tunisian political stage and the postponement of promises have an impact upon rebellious young people. While the government rarely speaks of its strategies in the battle against terrorism, researchers and sociologists have multiplied their studies addressing this issue. A sociological survey involving young people living in two under-served districts, Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen showed that the portrayal of these districts has declined in terms of "violence" and "deviance" – but not "Salafism." [5] This last element takes center stage for the youth of Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen – a phenomenon that did not exist before the Revolution. Imed Melliti indicates that the young people in these districts hold a position that de-politicises Salafism and does not see it as problematic: "Those who say that the Salafists are nothing but 'district children' – peers and childhood friends who found their way through religion and who are particularly attached to it (64.2%) – are only slightly more than those who qualify such groups as fundamentalist and extremist who impose their point of view using force (59.8%)."[6]

[5] Olfa Lamloum, Mohamed Ali Ben Zina (Dir), Les jeunes de Douar Hicher et d'Ettadhamen. Une enquête sociologique. Tunis, Arabesques & International Alert., 2015, 202 pages.

[6] Imed Melliti, « Le rapport au religieux chez les jeunes », in, Olfa Lamloum & Mohamed Ali Ben Zina. Les jeunes de Douar Hicher et d'Ettadhamen. Une enquête sociologique. (Dir), Tunis, Arabesques & International Alert., 2015,p,160

*The right to mobility and feelings of confinement*

The feelings of stigmatization and social injustice that run through Tunisian society mingle with another feeling of exclusion from the global social sphere related to closed borders. The rise of radicalism and of terrorist attacks targeting foreigners in particular, such as the attack on the Bardo Museum (March 2015) and Sousse (June 2015), stems from this situation of fractured otherness.[7] The ambivalence that marks the coexistence of love and hatred of the West, and what it symbolizes in terms of religious and civilizational otherness, is exacerbated by the brutal closure of European borders to North Africa. New migration policies have strengthened feelings of rejection among the young, who perceive themselves as imprisoned because their free movement is prevented.[8] The rejection of a visa request for a European country inflicts real psychological damage. Withdrawal effects caused by mobility, elsewhere and otherness appear very early among young

[7] The fact that Seifeddine Rezgui, author of the attack in Sousse, patronised hotels in Sousse and worked in a dance club as an entertainer is considered a very important analytic element, because desire for the West is emphasised in these workplaces and the dream of travelling to Europe becomes an obsession as well-expressed by one of Seif's childhood friends when talking to a journalist from Nawat. A young Tunisian, confronted with images of Western pleasures while simultaneously deprived of access to them, could become the opposite and turn this into hatred for the desired object. In my thesis I prove that some of the suicides of these men are "altruistic", in the sense that they openly question the factors of dependency or subjugation by which they feel crushed. On this subject, it is no coincidence that with his murderous actions Seifeddine Rezgui targeted British tourists who, unlike him, benefit from all facilities (money, free movement, hedonism etc) from which he is "radically" excluded.

[8] This statement can be found at the centre of my current thesis. Interviews conducted indicate this continuity between the violent extremist trend on the one hand, and migration policies that feed both desire and hatred of the West on the other. See for example the interview with the newspaper Humanité "Ixchel Delaporte. Wael Garnaoui. La promesse djihadiste vient remplacer pour certains la promesse occidentale qui ne fonctionne plus" Friday, March 17th, 2017".



Tunisians, and block their cultural creative processes and their experience of otherness at an early stage. For some people, this emotional shock can result in a true existential blow, a wound I have called "immobility traumatism."[9] Simon Mastrangelo has also shown that "there is great frustration among the young, especially linked to the presence of tourists in their country, symbolising the inequality in access to international mobility"[10], as confirmed in his studies on Tunisian illegal immigrants.[11] He hypothesizes that the sentiments of injustice that arise from it being impossible to emigrate or following expulsion from Europe leads the young to adopt virulent ideas and radical intentions arising from anger and frustration.

To attract emigrants, the Islamic State exploited the Muslim doctrine of migration, as presented in the videos published on its websites and publications such as *Dabiq* (2014) and *Dar al-Islam* (2015). The organisation emphasises the symbolic importance of migration inherent to the foundation of Islam, and in its recruitment material it develops this concept by creating a parallel with its own project for a caliphate. Using emotional triggers, the Islamic State compared the brotherhood and unity of the Ummah (the community) in its territories to the wandering and dispersion of the refugees and the *harraga* (clandestine migrants coming from Maghreb countries) in Europe. ISIS thus transformed the complex reality of the tragedy experienced by migrants and refugees in Europe so as to present in its propaganda what it calls "the other migratory route". By showing images of migrants battling

[9] Wael Garnaoui, "Mal-être des frontières. Harraga et les nouvelles subjectivités politiques", Mal-être contemporain dans les liens intersubjectifs, Cahiers de la Tunisie , to be published, 2020.

[10] Simon Mastrangelo, "Revendiquer le droit à émigrer via l'expression du sentiment d'injustice", L'Année du Maghreb, 18 | 2018, 21-35.

[11] Simon Mastrangelo, Emigrer en quête de dignité : Tunisiens entre désillusions et espoirs, Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2019.

with European administrations to legalise their rights to residence, and in general the difficult situations experienced by migrants and their children, ISIS presents a mythologized counter-image of easy migration to the Land of Islam. It presents this as a regeneration of life but also as the product of collective and civilising history. In one of its videos, the organisation calls for a reversal of the migratory flow, addressing those who embark on the paths of illegal immigration, the refugees suffering from border wars and children of former migrants relegated to stigmatized neighborhoods.[12] The "false" immigration movement to Europe is contrasted with the "real" movement of the West towards "Sham". This ascension from one material experience to another is presented as a way to repair the material psychological suffering of migrants to Europe. Welcoming the returning orphans of the Islamic State at the Palace in Carthage tends to present them as suffering people, the victims of multiple discriminations and with the right to be cared for by the state. It means making them people with whom we wish to identify more. This act of humanisation towards suffering people could be a moment for new policy directions that take into account the deeply-rooted reasons – poverty, education, immobility – that lead young people to a path of extremism instead of seeking their rightful place in society.

[12] A number of Jihad migrants that used clandestine immigration methods to reach Europe have become famous, in particular Anis Amri, the author of a jihadist attack in Berlin and who was killed in Milan on December 23rd 2016. His decision to take action was a sort of defensive reaction to an experienced exclusion and humiliation after crossing the Mediterranean. (Wael Garnaoui, "On the Way to the Christmas Market: The Case of Anis Amri", Workshop Is Terrorist Learning Different? Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, 21-22 November 2019).

Chapter VI

# Women's political participation in Tunisia

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Conventional wisdom suggests that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) suffers from profound gender inequality. In some respects, this view is not unfounded. The Global Gender Gap Index, an indicator of gender equality in access to the economy, education, health, and politics, shows that women are less equal in the MENA than in any other region (World Economic Forum, 2017). Yet a simplistic view of gender relations misses the significant variation in women's status, both across, as well as within countries. Tunisia is one of the most gender-equal societies in the MENA. From its founding, Tunisia's leaders promoted gender equality in the form of state feminism. This resulted over time in profound social and political changes that bolstered Tunisia's transition to democracy.

Today, the Tunisian constitution is unique worldwide in that it commits the government to ensure gender parity in all elected assemblies. As of 2020, women hold 25 percent of seats in the country's unicameral parliament (IPU, 2020) and nearly half of the seats in municipal councils. At the same time, significant gender inequities exist. Women in rural and less privileged areas of the country and those who are less affluent have fewer opportunities than those in coastal areas. Women with more economic resources are also rewarded with expanded opportunities compared to women from less privileged backgrounds. Moreover, women continue to be marginalized from the

executive and party leadership relative to the legislative branch, which is covered by parity provisions in the constitution. This essay summarizes several challenges that women face to achieve equality in political life in Tunisia today and places them against the backdrop of the many successes since independence.

## *Bourguiba and Ben Ali*

Tunisia is known as the birthplace of the Arab uprisings, but it is unique for its history of promoting gender equality as well. In 1956, Prime Minister and later President Habib Bourguiba (p. 1956-1987) decreed a Personal Status Code (PSC) that extended many rights to women, outlawed polygamy and the guardian system, and gave women an equal right to divorce. Bourguiba regarded advancing gender equality as a power consolidation strategy; he sought to reduce the power of already-weak tribes and reinforce his support among urban elites. He also believed that economic and social reforms would legitimize his regime (Charrad, 2001). This made Tunisia the most liberally-progressive state in the Arab world.

Ben Ali (p. 1987-2011) continued a program of state feminism, instituting affirmative action in the bureaucracy and state-run enterprises and supporting government-controlled women's rights organizations. In 1999, the dominant Constitutional Rally for Democracy (RCD) instituted a voluntary party quota. In the decades that followed, women's descriptive representation grew slowly. In 2007, to mark his 20th year in power, Ben Ali used his State of the Nation address to call on political parties to announce an increase in the RCD quota to 30 percent in the 2009 elections (Goulding, 2009). Later, on the eve of the Arab uprisings in 2011, 28 percent of the Chamber of Deputies members and 27 percent of local councilors were women. This proportion was the highest in



the Arab region at the time and exceeds women's descriptive representation in the US Congress, which currently stands at 23 percent.

## *The Arab Uprisings*

The Arab uprisings initially raised fears that women's rights would be eroded in Tunisia, particularly if the Islamist Ennahda party came to power. Ennahda won a plurality of votes in the Constituent Assembly elections in 2011 but moved to assure the public and civil society that it would not seek to reverse the PSC. Ennahda also promoted women's rights in some important and often overlooked ways. In 2011, 41 percent of the deputies elected from Ennahda to the Constituent Assembly were women, a higher proportion than any other party. In the 2014 parliamentary elections, this figure remained about the same at 39 percent.

Ennahda also utilized large numbers of women in party offices to mobilize voters. The party had 240 Women's Committees to campaign in all of Tunisia's 24 wilayat, with 320 women acting as heads of these committees (Khalil, 2014). It also expanded women's role in its internal leadership, appointing two women to Ennahda's 15-member political Bureau within a few years of the uprisings (Ben Amar, 2016). Thus, rather than bringing a rollback in women's status, the revolution allowed activists to deepen the principle of parity which had been initiated during the authoritarian era. In 2014, parliament passed one of the world's most gender progressive constitutions. The constitution called for an end to gender-based violence, which remains a substantial problem in the country, despite laws criminalizing gender-based violence, including rape and harassment. It further guarantees gender parity in all elected legislatures (Article 46, Tunisian Constitution,

2014), based on the "law of parity" in the 2011 electoral law. Initial attempts to achieve gender parity in the national legislature in 2011 failed because, while the quota's horizontal zipper system required all party lists to alternate male and female candidates, it did not require women to head half of all lists. As a result, women won 27 percent of seats in 2011. These gains were reinforced further. Activists worked to strengthen Tunisia's quota by negotiating a vertical zipper system that requires lists to alternate male and female candidates as well as requiring that half of all lists be headed by women. As of 2020, women hold 25 percent of seats in the country's unicameral parliament (IPU, 2020) and nearly half of the seats in municipal councils are held by women.

### *Challenges Remain*

While Tunisia's progress toward gender equality sets it apart in the Arab world and is progressive even by global standards, there is still a pressing need for continued reform. Tunisia ranks 123 of 142 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2017), where a higher number is less equal. Concerns are pronounced in rural areas; in these parts of the country, women are more likely to drop out of high school, be burdened with farm and domestic work, and remain financially dependent on men. Despite being illegal, discrimination in the private employment sector still exists, as does harassment and domestic violence. Moreover, not all women benefit equally from the advances that have tended to accrue to the middle and upper class (and, in some cases, more secular) women. According to the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), women, in general, are not well-represented in the media, and veiled women are virtually absent (Mfarej, 2011, 7; as cited in Khalil, 2014). The



presence of more educated, urban women in leadership also belies a much greater exclusion of poorer, rural women, who often have few opportunities in the public or private sectors. Women face other challenges in reducing gender gaps in political life. Women's descriptive representation in legislative assemblies, whether at the national, regional, or local levels, while impressive, is the high watermark of their political representation. Women are much more marginalized from the executive and political party leadership than from the legislative branch. Of the 107 parties legalized in 2011, only three were led by women: Salma Ammar headed the party of Social Center; Emna Menif co-directed Afek Tounes; and Emna Mansour Karoui ran the Movement of Democratic Edification and Reform (Mfarej 2011, 14, as cited by Khalil, 2014).

Gender gaps in political participation also exist. Tunisian women participate politically less than men, but the size of this gap is smaller than in Egypt and Libya. For instance, 34 percent of Tunisian men and women reported having voted in at least one legislative election before the revolution. Following the revolution, 75 percent of men but only 65 percent of women reported having voted in the 2011 Constituent Assembly elections. Moreover, when surveyed during the 2011 Constituent Assembly elections, women reported deciding which party to vote for later in the campaign than men did. Half of the Tunisian male voters decided at the beginning of the election campaigns while 38 percent of women did so, and 27 percent of women decided on Election Day compared to 17 percent of men (Benstead and Lust, 2015).

Engagement in political parties is low for both genders in Tunisia, but fewer women belong to parties than men. In Tunisia, 4 percent of men are members of political parties, compared to 2 percent of women. Sixteen percent of Tunisian men describe themselves as uninterested in parties, compared to 23 percent of women (Benstead and Lust, 2015). Women's

lower political engagement means that they have less influence on party policies, while parties have fewer incentives to serve women through legislation, club goods and services.

Finally, bias against women as leaders also exists. According to the sixth wave (2010-2014) of the World Values Survey, 24 percent of Tunisians disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that "Men make better political leaders". At the same time, bias levels were slightly lower in Algeria (25%), Libya (25%), Morocco (30%) and Lebanon (41%). While stereotypes create hurdles at the polls for female candidates and women are less likely to be engaged in formal political life, the opening brought by the Arab uprisings empower women to make further reforms to these and other challenges facing the nation. But, this will only happen if women continue to expand their presence and power through all structures of decision-making and if the government and civil society take measures to reduce economic and religious inequality among women and men from different backgrounds.



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Chapter VII

# Populism and conservatism, two sides of the same coin

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More than any other ideology, populism can only be understood when put into the social and intellectual context that explains both its supply side, which concerns the political use of specific populist themes rather than others, and its demand side, which ensures the appeal of those discourses within the public. However, in a revolutionary context, which Tunisia experienced after 2011, populism is typically colored by a mixture of spectacular hopes and dramatic fears. These intense and contradictory sentiments flooded a chaotically-liberated public sphere, fashioning a political discourse that combined revolutionary aspirations with conservative desires.[1]

Potentially explosive, this mixture shows the paradox of revolutionary aspirations when they have to deal with the question of liberty. Indeed, everyone wants change, but on the condition that it corresponds to a predetermined agenda. The problem is that when left to themselves, societies never act according to any established plan. As a consequence, the most revolutionary positions can easily degenerate into backward conservatism. In Tunisia, this tendency was further

[1] See, for example, Abdou Filali-Ansari, "The Languages of the Arab Revolution", in Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner (eds.) *Democratization and Authoritarianism in the Arab World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 9-10.

strengthened by the complex legacy of an oppressive regime that perverted modernization into an anti-democratic instrument.[2]

## *Tunisian binary politics*

In post-2011 Tunisia, it was impossible to separate vibrant democratic discourse from outright populism. Indeed, before its fall, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's government had been the main determinant of Tunisian political life, which was divided between support and opposition to the regime. When politics is thus reduced, populism goes hand in hand with democratic activism. In such circumstances, democracy is best described as an absolute; a cry of war that does not require programmatic visions or realistic plans[3].

It is always under dictatorial regimes that democracy is most popular. Understood as a distant ideal, democracy is negatively defined. It is what the regime and the reality are not. Despite its populist structure, this binary opposition seemed democratically legitimate, and did legitimize the Tunisian revolution. Problems began when it became obvious that, in order to exist in the real world, democracy could not, and therefore should not be defined outside the Tunisian reality.

However, this realistic claim gave rise to a perfectionist discourse that saw democratization as a betrayal of revolution. Since democracy is never realizable in full, that is, neither literally nor to a completely satisfactory extent, populism benefited from a continuous restructuring of the binary division between

[2] Stephen King, *Liberalization Against Democracy: The Local Politics of Economic Reform in Tunisia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

[3] Andreas Schedler, "Elections without Democracy: The Menu of Manipulations", *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002), pp. 36-50; Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust-Okar, "Elections under Authoritarianism", *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (2009), pp. 403-422.



the "us" – i.e., the revolutionary defenders of the people – and "them," or those who want to use democratic procedures as a means to steal the revolution, to escape its wrath and to pervert its nature. This was almost to be expected in a revolutionary context. With their tendency towards excess, revolutions always verge on hubris. Designed to overcome resistance, they fail when they forget, driven as they are by the irresistible force of their ideals and optimism, and by the necessity to adapt the absoluteness of their principles to the limits of their reality.

Fortunately however, in Tunisia this excess was the exception rather than the rule. Revolutionary populism could not overcome the belief that problems should be solved by change that was actually achievable. This widespread wisdom did not prevent deep divisions over the priorities of the ongoing transition, and the temptation to use diverse populist arguments fueled the resulting political conflicts. If the struggle must continue, its binary structure needs to be renewed.

In other words, Tunisians were called to keep fighting against those who were doing them harm. However, these aggressors were difficult to pinpoint since they were depicted in very contradictory terms. In this perspective, the short life of Ben Ali's resistance led to two decisive results. Firstly, mass mobilization did not have the time to reach its maximum potential, as shown by the limited participation of the main cities, especially Tunis, in the Revolution's events before the day of Ben Ali's flight. Secondly, many individuals and political forces who were historically linked to the regime did not openly commit themselves against the popular uprising. The vertical spread of the revolution did not reach its pinnacle before the fall of Ben Ali.

This situation did not allow the establishment to make a real distinction between the revolutionary and the anti-revolutionary elements, leading to a very peculiar form of populism: post-revolutionary revolutionaries. The spread of the revolution gathered momentum after the 14th of January 2011. Even

some of the regime's closest allies followed the trend, judging it was not yet too late.

While everyone was looking for revolutionary legitimacy, the meaning of the old regime and the implications of having been a part of it became a crucial political battlefield.[4] On one hand, the official discourse tried to reduce as much as possible the regime's sphere, especially by exaggerating the role of Ben Ali and his family. Their absence from the scene made them perfect scapegoats to protect larger interests.

On the other hand, surfing on the revolutionary dynamic, many political forces considered this position as a counter-revolutionary populism attempting to prevent real change. Their endeavor to widen the scope of responsibilities put them in an open conflict with the élites who continued to dominate the main bureaucratic institutions and mass media and who were portrayed as the remnants of the regime against whom it was necessary to fight for democratization.[5]

### *Conservative answers to conservatism*

The problem was that, once unleashed, this dynamic proved to be potentially destructive. Indeed, the scope of responsibility could be virtually unlimited. It could, and sometimes did, lead to reactionary positions. Tunisia's relatively recent colonial history was followed by long decades of authoritarianism that tried, with some success, to build a modern state despite, and sometimes against, a

[4] Gilbert Achcar, The People Want: *A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, (trans.) G. M. Goshgarian (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), pp. 60-64.

[5] For the transition paradigm, see Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).



conservative society.[6] Those successes allowed the consolidation of the regime by providing its institutions with social support and ideological legitimation.[7] Failures, however, strengthened deep-rooted beliefs that modernization was imposed by westernized elites who betrayed traditional values to serve their own interests.[8] This narrative supported the widespread perception that economic growth was unjustly distributed.[9]

The revolutionary context created after the fall of Ben Ali in 2011 unleashed contradictory frustrations that were bound to collide. In addition to the traditional conflict between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary discourses, Tunisian post-2011 politics was restructured around a deep fracture that separated conservative and progressive forces. Religiously-motivated conservatives shocked progressive militants with the effectiveness of their discourse and organizations.[10] Worrying that Tunisian fledgling democracy could degenerate into a theocracy, secular elites heavily invested in the rising popular nostalgia that resulted from the economic difficulties, security challenges and political instability of the transition.

[6] For a historical study of Tunisian modernization, beginning with pre colonial modernizing reforms and moving through the colonial and postcolonial periods, see Kenneth Perkins, *A History of Modern Tunisia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[7] This tendency continues even after 2011. For an example of one-sided readings of *Tunisian history, see Safwan Masri, Tunisia: An Arab Anomaly* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[8] The feeling of marginalization has a long history in Tunisian politics and society. See Dirk Vandewalle, "From the New State to the New Era: Toward a Second Republic in Tunisia", *Middle East Journal* 42 (1988).

[9] Mark Tessler, "Change and Continuity in Arab Attitudes toward Political Islam: The Impact of Political Transitions in Tunisia and Egypt, 2011-2013", in Mansoor Moaddel and Michele Gelfand (eds.) *Visions and Perspectives in the Study of Human Values in the Middle East* (London: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[10] For the evolution of Islamist political discourse, see Olivier Roy, "The Transformation of the Arab World", in Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner (eds.) *Democratization and Authoritarianism in the Arab World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

While one form of conservatism answered another, populism served both sides and proved highly effective in mobilizing public support, especially through social media networks.[11] Rising as a response to a revolutionary and democratizing context, the appeal to the people took different forms that corresponded to the complexity of Tunisian identity and to its recent and remote history. Religious features, post-colonial factors, nationalist discourse and trade unionist culture converged in nourishing a conservative, though tumultuous, stream.

In Islam, populism represents a permanent potential since individual and collective access to God is supposed to be direct, i.e. non-mediated through or by any institution. Though the role of religious scholars remains fundamental in interpreting the Koran and other religious scripture, this elite has historically existed but has been loosely organized. Therefore, influential freelance preachers can easily harness public support against official religious authority that can be accused of usurping religion by serving an unholy and corrupt regime.[12] Under an openly-secularizing, forcefully-imposed and relatively-corrupt regime, such as that which presided over Tunisia for decades, their puritan religious discourse was highly effective in mobilizing public fervor in favor of all forms of Islamism.[13] For its supporters, it was a question of common sense that the

[11] For the evolution of populism with regard to web technology, see Paolo Gerbaudo, "Populism 2.0", in Daniel Trottier and Christian Fuchs (eds.) *Social Media, Politics and the State: Protest, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 68.

[12] Fabio Merone and Francesco Cavatorta, "The Emergence of Salafism in Tunisia", *Jadaliyya* (August 17, 2012).

[13] For an analysis that argues that, though the Arab world remains decidedly backward in terms of electoral democracy, significant progress has been made in terms of liberal democracy, see Kunihiko Imai and Aysegul Keskin Zeren, "Democracy in the Middle East: Arab Spring and its Aftermath", *International Journal on World Peace* 34, no. 2 (June 2017).



revolution came as a rejection of repeated secular aggressions against a Muslim society.[14]

The post-colonial side of Tunisian populism strengthened this position. Even when it adopted an openly anti-Islamist stance, the widespread belief that independence did not mean sovereignty helped prepare Tunisian psychology for systematic anti-western hostility. Imposed modernization and active secularization were considered as the most obvious and easily understood signs of the mutation of colonialism. In light of this defensive view, the fall of Ben Ali was read as a second independence for Tunisia; the local agents of colonialism were being overthrown, as was the colonial power itself in 1956.[15]

In reaction to such threats, traditional elites sensed that their hopes lied exclusively with a successful counter offensive. Accusing Islamists of being in the pay of foreign powers – that ranging from Turkey to the United-States – they called for a nationalist reaction to a well-designed plan to deprive Tunisia from of its most precious achievements: its independence, its modern state, and individual and especially women's liberties.[16] Violence that culminated in terrorism and political assassinations transformed these threats into a concrete reality.[17]

[14] Secular regimes had not been always more successful in containing the rise of religious extremism than conservative religious ones. For the Moroccan experience, see Marina Ottaway and Meredith Riley, "Morocco: From Top-Down Reform to Political Transition?", *Carnegie Papers*, no. 71 (September 2006).

[15] Steffen Erdle, Ben Ali's «New Tunisia», 1987-2009: *A Case Study of Authoritarian Modernization in the Arab World* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2010), pp. 176-185.

[16] Safwan Masri, *Tunisia: An Arab Anomaly* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 266-268.

[17] Religious revolutionary populism contributed in making Tunisia the biggest provider of international fighters in Syria. *See Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq* (New York: Soufan Group, December 2015).

Furthermore, social and economic hardships turned the revolutionary optimism into a creeping pessimism that paved the way for another form of conservatism.[18] From an uprising against undue privileges, the Tunisian transition slowly degenerated into a democratization of these privileges. In addition to the spread of corruption in a context of state weakness, intermediary bodies used revolutionary pretexts and militant traditions to protect their members and to promote factional interests, often at the detriment of reforms and national interests.

For example, the labor union movement, which is the segment of secular Tunisian civil society with the strongest political influence, has fallen into this trap. Despite its socialist traditions, the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) seems to cater, almost exclusively, to what some Marxist scholars call the "labor aristocracy". In post-2011 Tunisia, while insiders with regular jobs in the formal sector continue to benefit from organized corporate negotiations, outsiders are simply left behind.[19]

These conflicting sources of populism created a synthesis between the seemingly contradictory drives of revolutionary aspirations and conservative desires. They created a latent feeling that everyone stood to lose with any upcoming change. It was, of course, too late to question the democratic direction of the political transition. But it was still possible to pander to instinctive fears in order to resist further liberalization. Aversion to loss being usually stronger than a desire for gains, the social,

[18] Economic drawbacks and social conflicts are not uncommon in transitional situations. For an example, see John Sheahan, "Economic Policies and the Prospects for Successful Transition from Authoritarian Rule in Latin America", in Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead (eds.) *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 154.

[19] Marina Ottaway, "Religious Conservatism, Religious Extremism, and Secular Civil Society in North Africa", in Stephen King and Abdeslam Maghraoui (eds.) The Lure of Authoritarianism: *The Maghreb after the Arab Spring* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), pp. 31-32.



economic or cultural calls for change were systematically met by multiform conservative coalitions who spread pessimism and entrenched the society in a deleterious status quo.

## *Conclusions*

The Tunisian political transition from a revolutionary rupture to a conservative status quo is all the more remarkable for having occurred rapidly and seamlessly. This outcome created a confusion between legitimate democratic changes and destructive irresponsible discourses. The assessment seems to depend, more often than not, on highly subjective variables, calling a position democratic when it reassures, and populist when it frightens.

Though the general outcome seems a slow and ineffective political botch-up – some would go as far as considering it a conservative status quo, or worse, a complete failure for the original revolutionary hopes. Such judgments overlook the various risks that political transitions imply and which Tunisia did manage to avoid.

Not to be underrated, this success has been, at least in part, due to the conservative consensus that most political forces seem to accept.[20] Institutionalized through decentralizing constitutional arrangements, such as proportional representation in parliament, a two-headed executive, multiple vetoes, power sharing and coalition governments, this consensus has been positive for democratization. However, the stalemate of opposing Tunisian populisms now seems to impede consolidation. Should the economic and social status quo last, populism may degenerate into an openly anti-democratic reaction.

[20] Stephen King, "Tunisia Triggers the Arab Spring", in Stephen King and Abdeslam Maghraoui (eds.) The Lure of Authoritarianism: *The Maghreb after the Arab Spring* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), pp. 216-218.

# Part III

# The Regional Chessboard

Chapter VIII

# Two ideas of development. Tunisia in the global struggle

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## *Waves of democracy and the Arab Springs*

When the Arab Springs began, many believed it marked the beginning of a new movement for the expansion of democracy across the world. From a historical point of view, the spread of democratic regimes is a recent phenomenon that is still very much in progress.[1] According to Samuel Huntington's periodization, three great "waves" of progressive expansion of democracy in the world have taken place in the contemporary era.[2] The first one saw the spread of liberal-democratic regimes in several countries that were experiencing industrialization in the final decades of the nineteenth century. This took the form of parliamentary regimes based on male electoral suffrage, which was granted on the basis of income and/or education. During the second wave, after the two world wars, mass democracy expanded and consolidated in parts of the world. This is the contemporary form of democracy: the right to vote is granted to all citizens, regardless of income or education. As recently as 1900, no such system existed on Earth, but by the middle of

[1] On the functioning and recent transformations of democratic systems, cfr. S. Cassese, *La democrazia e i suoi limiti*, Milano, Mondadori, 2017.

[2] S.P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman, Okla., University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

the last century, nearly one-third of humanity lived under this form of government. This was true for much of the advanced world, but also for other important countries (India in 1950). The essential political result of the two world wars – and of the bloody, difficult, defeat of the totalitarian Third Reich – was the advent of mass parliamentary democracy.

Since 1994, more than half of the planet's population has been living in democracies with certain characteristics. They are founded on the separation of powers and on universal, free and secret suffrage, which is guaranteed to all women and men of age. This outcome is the result of a third democratic wave, which began with the "carnation revolution" on April 25, 1974 in Portugal and which, towards the end of the twentieth century, brought mass democracy around the globe. The third wave transcended confessional backgrounds, including in Southern Europe, for example: Catholic Spain and Portugal; Orthodox Greece and Muslim populations in Albania and the former Yugoslavia. It also encompassed many Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Chile), countries in the former Soviet bloc, and also the so-called Asian "tigers" (Taiwan, South Korea, the Philippines and Indonesia), extending all the way to South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and other states on the African continent, including Nigeria in 1999. Of course, these were not always complete and satisfactory democratizations. Yet some scholars like Francis Fukuyama claimed that the wave signalled the "end of history."[3]

At first, the outbreak of the Arab Springs seemed to confirm the prophecy, and some thought that something similar in China might soon follow. However, things are going differently. Indeed, in some respects the Arab Springs have revealed the fragility of our hopes – and of democracy itself. The most populous country in the Middle East, Egypt, was quick to retreat from electoral

[3] Cfr. F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), New York, The Free Press, 2006.



democracy to authoritarianism (with the support of Saudi Arabia and the Emirates).[4] In the end, democracy has established itself only in a few limited contexts. Tunisia is the only state that can be considered democratic according to established international standards, and it stands today as the only true success of the Arab Springs. The fact that it was the culturally closest of all the Arab countries, may have helped. In Iraq, democracy was imposed by US occupation. In Morocco, Jordan and Kuwait, democratic institutions exist in limited forms and are constrained by the power of the monarchy. Recently, Algeria appears to have begun orienting itself towards a democratic perspective. On the whole, democracy remains an endangered phenomenon in the greater Middle East and North Africa, by any strict understanding of the term.

According to the *Economist's* 2018 Democracy Index, Tunisia qualifies as a flawed democracy, but it stands alone amongst the other Arab countries that are either authoritarian or, at best, hybrid regimes.[5] Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are among the most authoritarian regimes in the world, according to all rankings.[6] It is worth noting that the UAE, in particular, is also the most economically advanced of the Arab states. It is a country characterized by fully developed capitalism, with few restraints in the economic sphere and minimal levels of taxation and is seen as one of a handful of tax havens in the world.[7] Economic growth and economic laissez faire policies, economic freedom, do not necessarily go hand in hand with political freedom, as many hoped and believed at the beginning of the «third wave» of democracy.

[4] See G. Del Panta, *L'Egitto tra rivoluzione e controrivoluzione. Da piazza Tahrir al colpo di stato di una borghesia in armi*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019.

[5] https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index (last access on January 2020).

[6] See also the report by the Freedom House: the 2018 one is significantly named «Democracy in Retreat»: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019/democracy-in-retreat (last access on January 2020).

[7] E. Felice, *Dubai, l'ultima utopia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2020.

*Capitalism and democracy: a global challenge*

The link between capitalism and democracy, however, must be considered in a broader perspective. The future of democracy arguably will be decided in Asia, where authoritarian capitalist regimes have acted as a source of inspiration for the Emirates and the Saudis in the Arab world. The great challenge to liberal democracy in the Far East began in the mid-twentieth century, originating in Japan, which was the first economic powerhouse of the region. After the tragedy of World War II, Japan started its recovery under the aegis of a developmental state model. This was essentially a soft authoritarian regime within a democratic framework. Important institutions, from the bureaucracy to the police forces, were markedly authoritarian, there was a de-facto single ruling party until 1993.[8] Between the fifties and sixties, this model was taken up by the four "Asian Tigers," South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong; a decade later, also by four countries in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand). All of them at the time were authoritarian, or at least semi-authoritarian, regimes, where political repression played a crucial role in keeping wages low, thus lowering production costs and boosting exports. There was some variation: the most populous countries of Southeast Asia had raw material deposits, unlike the "Asian Tigers" and Japan. But the approach and growth strategy were similar and borrowed from the Japan model. It started with the less technologically advanced industrial sectors which were labor-intensive, i.e., where a country's "comparative advantage" of low wages is greatest, before gradually expanding to include capital-intensive ones and high technology. Starting

[8] C. Johnson, *Japan: Who Governs? The Rise of the Developmental State*, London and New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1995.



at the end of the 1970s, China experienced the most spectacular economic growth ever seen in human history – it was also following the same model. In many ways, China represented an extreme, and magnified, example of it. Shortly after China began their economic shift, Vietnam also started to move in the same direction. The good news is that, particularly between the 1980s and 1990s, the countries that moved first have made significant steps along the road to democracy. This started with Japan, where the dominance of a single party is now over, and with South Korea, which is arguably the most economically advanced of the region. Many hoped that China and Vietnam would also go down the same path. It is a hope that remains to this day, and one that similarly applies to the Arab world.

In recent years, however, China has been going in the opposite direction under the leadership of Xi Jinping. Several recent signs are unequivocal. In what is now the second largest economy in the world, a true authoritarian tightening is taking place. Among other developments, Xi Jinping was de facto proclaimed president for life in 2018, China has also been moving backwards in the domain of human rights. China is now a fully capitalist regime, characterized by an unrestrained capitalism that, at times, resembles that of Dubai whose policies are similarly unconstrained by liberal institutions or the separation of powers. In some ways, it looks better than the UAE, given that the leadership succession procedure in China is not a hereditary dynasty as is the case for the regimes of the Arabian Peninsula and in North Korea. A certain amount of contestation is tolerated, even within the context of single-party rule and a possible lifetime president. But there is nothing to indicate that China and Vietnam will follow in the footsteps of Japan and South Korea. It is possible that the Asian model will eventually split into two models, one being a democratic model (led by Japan and South Korea), and a much larger model led by China, which is not democratic. It is possible that

the Japanese system might also regress towards a hybrid form (there are already symptoms of growing nationalism, which is its ideological premise). The complexity of capitalist development is reflected in a plurality of competing interests that emerge within it. It may be that liberal democracy will emerge as the best form of representation and protection in China, as occurred in the much of West, but the challenge is ongoing.

For now, Asian capitalism is divided into two branches, one of which is firmly undemocratic. It also includes Thailand, whose capital Bangkok, one of the main destinations of world tourism (along with Dubai) and which has been governed by a military junta since 2014. Even Hong Kong and Singapore, after the initial steps forward, have now come to halt along the path to democratization, in part because of China's influence. These are two of the most important centers of the world economy, with few rivals today in terms of production capacity and as capitals of finance for a huge portion of the planet, increasingly resembling the most advanced city-state in the Arab world (Dubai, again). It is true that Hong Kong was the protagonist of an extraordinary democratic mobilization in 2019 and 2020, but this is purely defensive and does not seem to have taken root in the rest of China. But what is the idea on which the authoritarian Chinese leadership bases its legitimacy? The idea, shared by the Arab authoritarian rulers, is that human rights are a Western invention that do not determine happiness. All that matters, rather, is material well-being. In many respects, the most extreme version of this thesis can be found, in the Arab world, in Dubai.[9]

Tunisia symbolizes, on the other hand, the opposite view, with respect to all the Arab world and beyond. This view is, indeed, the traditional idea of liberalism, which is a political philosophy based on human rights. Economic freedom is one

[9] Felice, *Dubai*, cit.



part of a wide range of human freedoms and rights which are guaranteed, first of all, by (liberal) democracy. Such a view, which is a product of Western culture and Western history, is now in crisis both inside and outside of the Western world.[10] In this respect, Tunisia stands on the frontline of a global struggle. Of course, a significant improvement in economic conditions is vital in order for liberal democracy to be appealing. The picture is gloomy in this respect: at purchasing power parity, per capita GDP in 2018 Tunisia stood at only 15% of that of the United Arab Emirates.[11] Western countries, and the European Union in particular, are aware of this problem and of Tunisia's strategic position. European aid to Tunisia has been consistent: 3.5 billion euros from 2011 to 2016, making Tunisia the most favored of all European neighbors in terms of per capita support.[12] The results, however, have been disappointing in terms of economic growth and in terms of further advances in democracy and human rights – one of the explicit goals linked to this aid. The mismanagement of funds at the local level and the inefficiency of public administration appear to be the main reasons for this failure. This has also occurred within the European Union's underdeveloped regions: some have greatly improved after receiving the «cohesion funds» from the UE, while others have lagged behind, such as Southern Italy.[13] It is thus of the utmost importance for the European Union to continue working towards improving Tunisia's own capabilities through better institutions and rules, as well as by providing resources to enhance the country's education and human capital.

[10] E.g. E. Felice, *Storia economica della felicità*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2017.

[11] The Economist, *Pocket World in Figures*, 2019 Edition, London, Profile, 2018.

[12] https://www.europeandatajournalism.eu/ita/Notizie/Data-news/L-Ue-sta-venendo-meno-agli-aiuti-promessi-alla-Tunisia (last access on January 2020).

[13] E. Felice, *Perché il Sud è rimasto indietro*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2013.

Chapter IX

# Economic stagnation and multicultural integration: the dual challenge for Europe

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## *Europe's current challenges*

This short text will focus on two of the many challenges that are confronting Europe: economic stagnation and the integration of foreigners and migrants. Europe is facing a multi-faceted series of challenges, of which the economy and migrations are certainly the most serious. These challenges include the need to support sustainable economic growth; citizens requests of more protection from internal and external security threats, including from terrorism; climate change and energy transition; the preservation of a free and fair trade international regime; the impact of digitalization on our economies and on our societies; an unstable and unsafe international context; and finally a reduced support for the EU from our public opinions, witnessed by the emergence of nationalist and anti-EU political parties, and by the growing diffusion of populism.

## *The impact of the economic crisis and the measures adopted during the economic crisis*

The 2008 financial crisis originated in the US, but soon hit Europe, and had a much slower reaction compared to the US. As a consequence of the crisis, the weaknesses of Europe's

economic governance and the inadequacies of the rules governing the Euro became evident, characterized as they were by stringent and binding rules for monetary policies, but by very light and non-binding mechanisms for the coordination of economic policies. During the crisis, important new measures were adopted, often in emergency situations, which improved the governance of the Euro through new and more stringent rules to keep national budgets under control, the European Stability Mechanism which provides financial assistance at countries experiencing serious financial difficulties, an apparently more efficient procedure to increase convergence of domestic economies with the European Semester, an EU banking union with a single supervisory mechanism for major European banks and a common rule book for bank recovery and resolution, and a Single Resolution Fund (so far exclusively private) to assist banks at risk of bankruptcy, and finally, a decisive role played by the European Central Bank, which adopted a series of unconventional monetary policies (the LTRO, Outright Monetary Transactions and more recently the QE, still in force and recently extended).

### *The worst phase of the crisis is now behind us*

The EU has avoided the worst-case scenario; and during the crisis important measures had been adopted which have increased economic integration, particularly among members of the Eurozone. But Europe is still suffering the impact of the economic crisis. Europe's economy is growing (after a period of recession and after long stagnation), but this growth is fragile, and it is not sufficiently perceived by public opinions. In any case, Europe's economy is growing less in comparison with other regions of the world. In some European countries, GDP and per capita GDP is still below the levels of 2007. Economic growth is still weak and it is not equitably distributed both



among countries and within countries. The impact of such weak growth on the levels of employment is modest. Respective economic performances in the various member States are excessively differentiated. And in many countries of the Eurozone the level of public debt (compared to GDP) is still excessive (even though generally sustainable). Finally, productivity and competitiveness are equally not performing at the same level in many member states. Important differences in income distribution remain among countries and within individual countries.

### *What is still needed in Europe*

The new EU rules on fiscal discipline (introduced during the worst phase of the crisis) have proven to be necessary to restore confidence in the Euro. But in some cases, they have produced procyclical effects. The austerity policies that were implemented during the toughest phase of the economic crisis have in some cases aggravated recessionary trends in the economies in some members of the Eurozone. In the future, these rules should become more transparent and should be implemented with the necessary flexibility. The various unconventional measures of monetary policies adopted by the ECB have been essential. But they will not last forever. Europe's economies will have to adjust to a situation where low interest rates and Quantitative Easing will not be utilized any more. Monetary policies alone will not solve the structural problems of Europe's economies. National Governments in the EU will need to continue the process of structural reforms, which will essentially remain a responsibility of individual countries. But the EU can play a role in promoting and encouraging structural reforms through moral suasion, political pressure, and possibly financial incentives.

The Banking Union must be completed with a fiscal backstop for the private common resolution fund, and possibly

with a European common deposit insurance scheme. Equally, the reform of the governance of the Euro should be completed, possibly with a common Eurozone budget, with an autonomous fiscal capacity and a stabilization function. In this respect the new proposal for the creation of a fund (with very limited resources) to stimulate convergence and competitiveness goes in the right direction, but is clearly not sufficient. National Governments should continue the process of reduction of excessive public debt, and should improve the quality of public expenditure. But they will also need to increase the level of investments both publicly and privately, in material and immaterial infrastructures, and in social programs. Finally, economic growth should be sustainable, both socially and environmentally, and inclusive so as to be able to take care of the losers of globalization (for instance with creation of a common fund to finance support for cyclical unemployment). Further measures will be necessary to reduce social malaise and inequalities in income distribution in order to increase inclusiveness and to stimulate employment specially for the youngsters and to promote effective measures of integration of migrants and foreigners. A more effective and inclusive strategy should be implemented to fight climate change and global warming.

### *Migrations and the problems of integration of migrants in Europe's societies. The coincidence of migrations and economic slowdown*

Migration flows are no longer an emergency, as they were in 2014 and 2015. But they have become a structural phenomenon with which our societies are confronted daily. The broader phenomenon of immigrant-origin populations have become a political and social problem in most European countries, a divisive issue among governments and political parties, and



an element affecting electoral trends and behaviors of national governments. The special attention on the phenomenon of migrations in Europe (and not only in Europe) is also one of the consequences of the very special context which developed in Europe in these last years. As mentioned before, European countries are still suffering the consequences of the economic and financial crisis of 2008, a crisis which provoked an unprecedented loss of wealth, a drastic reduction of GDP and of per capita income, which increased poverty and inequalities and the stability of public finances of many countries at risk, therefore having an impact on the sustainability of our welfare systems. However, the worst phase of the economic crisis is behind us, and our economies are growing again after years of recession. But the consequences of the economic crisis are still felt. Unemployment and, in particular, youth unemployment is still too high. Poverty remains a problem for large sectors for the population. Income inequalities continue to affect our societies. Welfare systems, and in particular pension systems, remain at risk of sustainability in ageing societies. And, as a matter of fact, the peak of migratory flows has coincided with the aftermath of the economic crisis. It should not therefore come as a surprise that the mix of the economic crisis with growing migratory flows could become explosive for its political consequences.

### *Migrations as a structural phenomenon: Europe's weak migratory policies*

The phenomenon of migrations is not new but its dimension and geographical concentration of these flows have generated many cases a reaction of fear and rejection. Migrations have become a structural phenomenon with which Europe will have to deal for many years. In absolute terms, the numbers of migrants should be sustainable. And, as such, the phenomenon should

be manageable. But flows are concentrated in some countries and the pressure is higher in countries of southern Europe with maritime borders. Not surprisingly in those countries migratory flows have been exploited by certain political forces as a threat to the security and cultural identities of citizens. The collective European response has been perceived as insufficient and inadequate in particular as far as the internal dimension of a supposed common migratory policy is concerned. In practice the principle of solidarity has not been implemented in the absence of a sound legal basis for binding measures. National Governments have shown very little availability for forms of burden sharing of illegal migrants (and so far only as a result of ad hoc decisions on a case by case basis). No progress has been realized in the reform of the Dublin Regulation. And even the modest program of relocation of asylum seekers, proposed by the Commission, has not actually been implemented. Finally, very little results have been obtained in the direction of a truly European program of repatriation of illegal migrants. If the internal component of the migratory policy has been altogether disappointing, some more encouraging results have been achieved in the external component, in particular with a series of agreements with countries of origin and of transit, with the strengthening of Frontex and the creation of an External Borders Agency.

### *The tasks ahead*

In the future, the EU should continue to search a common response to this challenge on the basis of some principles: openness toward asylum seekers with speedy procedures for the recognition of the status of political refugee; control of economic migrants and implementation of readmission and repatriation; definition of channels of legal migration corresponding to the needs of the labor markets; a program of legal migration managed at the European level, based on the principle of a matching between the requirements of the job market in the European countries and the arrivals from third countries; and finally implementation of reasonable and effective integration policies of legal migrants. But even though, in the medium-long term, ageing European societies will need migrants and foreign workers, in the short term, unmanaged migratory flows may generate undesirable political and social consequences. We have already seen how and to what extent this phenomenon has stimulated reactions of rejection in European public opinions and has fueled support for nationalist and xenophobic political parties. It is important to be aware that only a correct management of the arrivals will make possible the implementation of effective policies of integration of foreigners in domestic labor markets and in national welfare systems.



### *The political consequences of the economic crisis and of migrations*

The economic crisis and its consequences, combined with the pressure of migratory flows, have produced an impact also on the political sphere. They have fueled people's dissatisfaction with political elites. They have contributed to delegitimize national governments and European institutions, and they have weakened the role of intermediate organs and bodies. These two phenomena have in turn generated a growing request of protection by the citizens to which mainstream parties have not been capable to provide credible answers; and they have contributed to promote the success of populist leaders who pretend to speak directly to citizens to be able to understand and correctly interpret the people's interests, who pretend to provide easy answers to complex phenomena. They have greatly contributed to the rise of populism and to the weakening

of the rules of representative democracies. The phenomenon is complex and cannot easily be classified under a single definition. What populist political forces have in common is the ability to capitalize on public discontent, a rejection of traditional political parties, a mistrust towards elites and ruling class, a certain fascination for forms of direct democracy, and a corresponding skepticism of intermediate bodies and, in some cases, parliamentary democracy altogether. They also exhibit strong support for the nation state and a corresponding mistrust for supranational organizations; a strong support for national (in some cases even local) identities, and a corresponding opposition to migrations and to diversity more generally. But their political platforms can be very different. Generally speaking, they share strong views on the need to contain migrations, to defend national identities, to implement rigorous controls at the external borders, to adopt restrictive measures on asylum, to repatriate irregular economic migrants. They also share a sentiment of mistrust towards supranational institutions, and they advocate a return to the nation state as the exclusive source of democratic legitimacy. But their economic agendas are very differentiated. Some would advocate programs of nationalizations of companies and enterprises, and, more generally, a massive return of the State in their economies. Others would implement a more liberal and market oriented economic agenda. Finally and more generally, a special consideration should also be devoted to a better understanding of the impact of the new information technologies, of digitalization, and of the diffusion of social media in the functioning of democracies. Even if there are not yet conclusive reports on this phenomenon and on its dimension, there is no doubt that digitalization and social media have dramatically modified the quality of communications between politicians and public opinions, have incredibly accelerated the time frames of political cycles, and are undermining the role of the traditional institutions of our democracies.

Chapter X

# The Italian-Tunisian strategic partnership in the Mediterranean

*Lorenzo Fanara*
Italian Ambassador to Tunisia

Only seventy-five kilometers separate the Island of Pantelleria and Cap Bon, and on a clear day, one can see this island's outline from the Tunisian coast. Italy and Tunisia are far too close to not get along well. The day I presented my credentials to President Béji Caïd Essebsi, he told me that the two countries "are obliged to cooperate by geography". On the other hand, geographical proximity also means that as far as Italy is concerned, Tunisia is the first port of entry to Africa, a young continent and one experiencing great expansion, in which our future prosperity and security will now be decided. The Tunisian gateway, thanks also to new free trade agreements signed by Tunisia – such as the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) – opens a potential market of 500 million consumers to Italian companies.

Italian-Tunisian relations have roots dating back centuries and are based on an intense tradition of exchanges – not only economic ones, of course – and positive influence, which have mutually enriched the two shores of the Mediterranean. However, over the past two years, this strategic partnership has intensified significantly at every level; political, economic, juridical and cultural.

At a bilateral level, the most powerful sign of this rise in bilateral relations was the first bilateral intergovernmental summit held in Tunis on April 30th, 2019. The simultaneous participation

of the two heads of government and the most important ministers in the two countries conveyed a very strong signal for the first time in the history of Italian-Tunisian relations. This signal involved shared views on regional and international issues of common interest, a consolidation of the political partnership as well as a strengthening of economic and commercial relations also thanks to the simultaneous organization of a qualified "business forum".

The signing of a joint statement by the two heads of states, as well as six important agreements concerning different areas, confirmed this intensification of the strategic partnership. The agreement, known as "ELMED", (involving the development of infrastructure for an underwater power interconnector) is of particular importance and its objective is to maximize energy exchanges between Europe and North Africa. Energy security is in fact one of the cornerstones of bilateral cooperation, aimed at supporting Tunisia in its increasing exploitation of renewable sources.

Another indicator of the strategic partnerships' intensification is the encouraging trend in economic-trade cooperation. In 2018, bilateral exchanges amounted to almost six billion euros, and Italy became Tunisia's top exporter. This first position was confirmed during the first ten months of 2019. The Tunisian market has become the second most important one for Italian exports to the MENA area (after the United Arab Emirates), while Italy is Tunisia's second most important client, with Tunisians exports to the Italian market increasing. There is a very important presence of Italian investments in Tunisia with over 800 companies working there, almost a third of foreign-owned businesses creating over 63,000 jobs. The Italian-Tunisian Business Forum held during the intergovernmental summit also analysed in depth opportunities for cooperation in the agricultural-industrial, infrastructural and transport sectors, as well as that of renewable energy.



The new emphasis marking the partnership between Italy and Tunisia is also made particularly evident by the qualitative progress achieved in addressing policies involving migration. In fact, it was decided to move from the traditional "two-way" approach (cooperation in exchange for technical assistance) to an all-encompassing one, which is not restricted to the battle against illegal immigration, but is also aimed at opening other channels for legal immigration.

While maintaining the effectiveness of current agreements – it is worth bearing in mind that in 2019, 70% of Tunisians who had arrived in Italy illegally were repatriated – negotiations for a Migratory Framework Agreement resumed with attention paid to training programmes and incentives for circular migration. The publication of the decree regulating migratory flows for 2019 established a quota of non-EU workers allowed to enter Italy legally divided by regions as established by the Ministry for Labor and Social Policies, and is a move in this direction (paying special attention to countries that cooperate the most, among them of course Tunisia). Cooperation has in this way broadened thanks to the creation of processes that encourage and facilitate legal migration.

With Tunisia we also have a vast program involving development cooperation, animated by the same innovative spirit that characterizes current economic and political relations. In this field the decision is also to look to the future, addressing the country's wide ranging needs. It is this new setting that resulted in the idea of assisting Tunisia in its administrative decentralization process (a priority established by Tunisia's new President of the Republic, Kais Said), with financing approved for 32 new municipalities created by the first local elections held in the history of this country. But, there is more. With the means made available by cooperation for development, the goal is to stimulate entrepreneurship, especially among the young. One example concerns the agricultural sector. 57 million

euros, through specific lines of credit, has been allocated to supporting farmers as well as a social and supportive economy. It is with increasing interest that Italy looks to young Tunisians for their talent and their potential. We want to pay greater attention to them with specific programs that will pave the way for new professional opportunities.

While as Essebsi says geography obliges us to cooperate, violent extremists and terrorists continue to wish to divide us. The progress made in the quality of Italian-Tunisian relations has allowed us to be united in our reaction to both cultural explosions as well as those of Jihadist bombs. I remember, for example, the attacks that devastated the city of Tunis in June 2019. It was a crucial moment, right at the beginning of the summer season, when it was essential to place our trust in the tourist sector, and Italy and Tunisia reacted to these terrorist attacks by organizing a production of Italian opera in the Roman amphitheater in El Jem (in itself a symbol of our cultural links). Over one thousand spectators joined this initiative with which Italy wished to express its solidarity to a democratic Tunisia.

It is no surprise that a special relationship has been established between Italy and Tunisia, a relationship that, as emphasized, has experienced progressive strengthening in all sectors. For Italy, Tunisia is not only a neighboring country and a strategic partner, but also an element of stability for the entire region. Nowadays this is even more the case, since the country is a worthy example of a democratic transition and therefore a model to be followed. Supporting the process involving democratic consolidation in Tunisia is a priority for Italy. One example, in this sense, is the cooperation established – within the framework of a European twinning project – between the Italian State Council and the Tunisian Administrative Court to reform administrative justice and improve people's access to these services. Nine years after the revolution, Tunisia is called upon to strengthen the process it has started, made vulnerable



unfortunately by insufficient economic growth and the deterioration of the Libyan crisis (together with Italy, Tunisia is the country most affected by the collapse of Libya). Italy stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Tunisia to support the country.

I wanted to outline the more important aspects of the strategic relationship between Italy and Tunisia, emphasizing the approach that has allowed more wide-ranging bilateral relations. The spirit that inspired this difference in quality of bilateral relations could, where repeated, also inspire a new phase in Euro-Tunisian relations. The European Union has supported the young and fragile Tunisian democracy, but we are aware, however, that in order to be sustainable, political transition also requires an economic one. Thanks to peaceful and lawful presidential and general elections, Tunisia has been able to address the electoral process, overcoming a test that was anything but a given. Now the Tunisian institutions are called upon to live up to expectations concerning a reform of an economic system that is not yet fully capable of complying with this young country's growth and employment requirements. Italy can make available to the Euro-Tunisian dialogue a wealth of credibility and friendship accumulated in recent years, so as to encourage Tunisia to embark on reforms the European Union hopes will be implemented. This is the most effective way of preserving and consolidating the democratic victories achieved by this country that is so close and so strategic for us.

# Authors

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With the Arab Spring occurring almost a decade ago, the Tunisian Republic's political, social and economic unique responses towards the upheavals of Arab Spring have continued to stand out compared to their North African and Middle Eastern neighbors. This monograph, with contributions from academics, constitutionalists, diplomats and journalists who are experts on the MENA area, is the result of a need to revisit the development of this North African country's democratic project, which has transformed from a newborn bud to a young plant that is exposed to the elements yet remains deeply rooted to the ground. The focus is on the dangers that the smallest political laboratory in the Mediterranean might encounter if a few corrections are not made to its course over the short-medium term: a new season of instability, political and economic, if courageous and ready impulse strategies should not be approved quickly, even more necessary than before after the crisis from Covid-19.

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