



The Tunisian Revolution An Opportunity for Democratic Transition

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For decades Tunisia projected an image of stability to the world and distinguished itself from other Arab countries for its macroeconomic achievements and progress in the areas of economic growth, health, education and women's rights. This widely held view of apparent stability was shattered on January 14th, when President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali fled the country amid widespread chaos and social unrest caused by high levels of unemployment and inequality. Events in Tunisia sound alarm bells not just for this country and its future but for many regimes of the Middle East, the sustainability of which is often taken for granted. The policies of the European Union towards the region are now also thrown into question.

Over the years since Ben Ali's rise to power in 1987, Tunisia became one of the most repressive and authoritarian regimes in the region. The systematic and wholesale civil and political repression hampered any expression of dissent and encouraged the spread of corruption at various levels. In spite of widespread intimidation, the violation of human rights, the lack of political freedoms and endemic corruption, Ben Ali and his inner circle succeeded in securing the support of the population through the distribution of social benefits. The European Union and external actors supported Ben Ali's regime almost unconditionally, swayed by the former President's pursuit of neo-liberal economic liberalization and his cooperation with other EU objectives, notably the fight against terrorism and illegal migration.

The recent events in Tunisia have revealed the tipping point between apparent stability and long-term sustainability; the point at which an unsustainable status quo tips over into political and social

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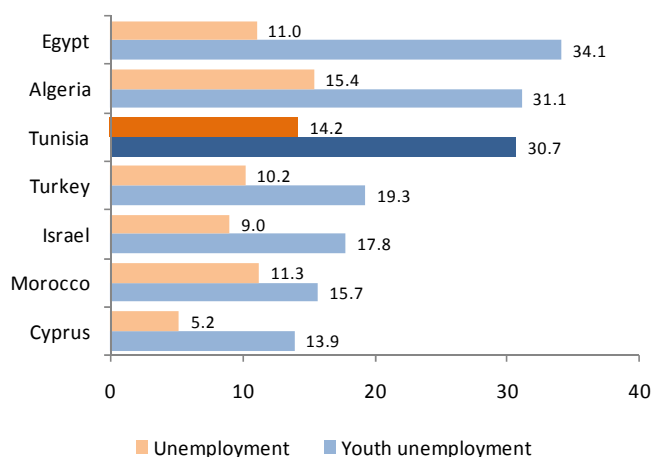
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instability.² On closer inspection, it becomes clear that the regime’s increasing inability to address the major socioeconomic challenges of the last decade – youth unemployment, growing regional disparities and corruption – is the reason for this. Unemployment among young people with secondary and higher education has been growing since 2006, with over 30% of the working age population between 15 and 24 years of age unemployed, a figure comparable to that of neighbouring Egypt (34%) and Algeria (31%), but much higher than in Morocco (16%), Israel (18%) and Turkey (19%) (see Figure 1).

The global financial crisis has intensified Tunisia’s labour market problems; given its high economic dependency on the EU, unemployment, particularly among graduates, has continued to increase since 2006 (to 18.2% in 2007 and 21.9% in 2009), while job creation has slowed down (from 80,000 jobs created in 2007 to only 57,000 in 2009).³ At the same time, although the overall economic situation in Tunisia has improved in recent decades, regional disparities have widened, with the south and centre/west of the country excluded from the benefits of sustained growth.

Add to this mix a severe lack of citizens’ political rights, freedom of expression, association, access to free media,⁴ and rising levels of corruption,⁵ and the unwritten social contract between Ben Ali and the Tunisian people – repression in ‘exchange’ for social benefits – breaks down.

Figure 1. Unemployment among young people in Tunisia compared to other countries in the region (2005-06)



Sources: UN and the World Bank.

A large protest movement thus formed in December 2010, for the first time since the establishment of Ben Ali’s regime. The protests spread rapidly from Sidi Bouzid to Tunis and other towns and on January 14th, protesters succeeded in overthrowing the president. Although initially in response to socioeconomic problems, the protests rapidly became political in nature since the roots of these socioeconomic problems are, in fact, essentially political. Economic reforms have been used primarily as a tool to redistribute privileges to the families of the president and his wife, who came to dominate the

² See Sylvia Colombo (2010), *Implications of violent conflicts and neo-authoritarianism on state sustainability*, MEDPRO Technical Paper, October.

³ Banque Centrale Tunisienne (2010), *Rapport Annuel 2009* (<http://www.bct.gov.tn/bct/siteprod/documents/fiche11.pdf>)

⁴ According to the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) in 2009, Tunisia lags significantly behind regional averages in “Voice and Accountability”, remaining among the bottom 15% of over 200 countries surveyed.

⁵ Tunisia has moved down several places since the 1998 survey.

country's economy, and the corruption vehemently denounced by the protesters has hampered any potential for job creation.⁶

Tunisia demonstrates how a social contract that is based on political repression contains the seeds of its own demise. Recent events in the country also show that although many Arab regimes have proven particularly resilient to crises in the past, political and social stability cannot be taken for granted. Other regimes in the region to some extent share the same fragility and illusionary stability that Tunisia displayed before these dramatic events.

Socio-economic problems in the Arab world require, above all, credible and sustainable political solutions. Hence, unless far-reaching and genuine – not cosmetic – political reforms are put in place, a further deterioration of socio-economic conditions is all but inevitable and, with it, the likelihood of political and civil unrest. Arab regimes and external actors such as the EU would be well advised to factor this increasingly evident reality into their policies. A radical rethink of EU policies towards the region is called for, the bottom line of which should be to halt lenient EU policies towards countries that are not implementing serious political reform, despite their proven willingness to cooperate in the fight against terrorism, illegal migration and broader geostrategic objectives.

As for Tunisia, while the large and spontaneous mobilisation of Tunisians has achieved a critical historic success – the end of the Ben Ali reign – it remains unclear whether the near future will bring genuine political reforms essential for stability or whether continuing instability will spread to other countries in the region. It is uncertain, for example, whether the unity transition government, which for the first time includes members of the opposition, will deliver on its promises to the public to make radical reforms towards democratisation.⁷ The Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD) party, which has dominated Tunisia's political scene, has lost the people's confidence and there are loud calls for its dissolution.⁸

Yet opposition forces remain weak, poorly organised and divided, and the country lacks the necessary legal framework for a vibrant political and civil society. The army, which so far has limited itself to containing social unrest, may overstep the mark and enter the political stage. The challenge now is to organise credible electoral platforms and campaigns that reflect the will of the population.

To promote this democratic transition, the EU, while abandoning its unconditional support for the previous Tunisian regime (and hence the related party), needs to act quickly on its declaration of support for “a genuine democratic transition”⁹ and consult with political parties both from the transition government and beyond to prepare for the running of the next elections. All efforts must be made to ensure that these elections are free and fair, pursuing, inter alia, the constitutional changes that are necessary to make this happen. A positive resolution of this crisis will only be achieved if the internal and external players follow the lessons of successful democratic transitions elsewhere.

⁶ The problem of corruption and excesses was also denounced in a WikiLeaks cable from the US Embassy in Tunis, dated 2009. As proven by recent events, the cable was prescient in warning that oppression, corruption and economic mismanagement were “increasing risks to the regime's long-term stability”.

⁷ A first step in this direction is the decision by the new national unity government to recognise all banned political parties and to extend an amnesty to all political prisoners.

⁸ These calls have prompted the dissolution of the political bureau of the party following the resignation of its members who are part of the interim unit government.

⁹ Joint statement by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Štefan Füle on the situation in Tunisia, Brussels, 17 January 2011 (http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/118873.pdf).