



## WP2 – Geopolitics & Governance

# Tunisia: Changes and Challenges of Political Transition

Maria Cristina Paciello

MEDPRO Technical Report No. 3/May 2011

### Abstract

For 23 years, a combination of harsh repression and impressive socio-economic development in Tunisia ensured a certain level of stability of Ben Ali's regime. However, on 14 January 2011, after several weeks of anti-government protests, the President fled the country, revealing the fallacy of the 'Tunisian model'. While the departure of Ben Ali is an important step towards Tunisia's political change, the fate of its democratic transition remains uncertain. In light of these changes and challenges, this paper first assesses the factors underpinning the former stability of Ben Ali's regime; it then investigates the causes of its underlying unsustainability, culminating in the anti-government popular uprising in December 2010-January 2011 and the removal of Ben Ali; finally the paper evaluates the prospects for a real democratic transition in Tunisia, by highlighting the main political and socio-economic challenges that confront the country.

This paper was produced in the context of the MEDPRO (Mediterranean Prospects) project, a three-year project funded under the Socio-economic Sciences & Humanities Programme of DG Research of the European Commission's Seventh Framework Research Programme. MEDPRO Technical Reports give an indication of work being conducted within MEDPRO thematic Work Packages (WPs) and aim at stimulating reactions from other experts and academics in the field.

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ISBN 978-94-6138-100-2

Available for free downloading from the MEDPRO ([www.medpro-foresight.eu](http://www.medpro-foresight.eu))  
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# Contents

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Introduction .....	1
1. Behind the Veil of Stability of Ben Ali's Regime (1987-January 2011).....	1
1.1 Tight and systematic control over political life .....	1
1.2 Weak opposition forces .....	3
1.3 Social policy as a tool of legitimacy and control.....	3
1.4 The EU's reluctance to promote real political change in Tunisia.....	4
2. Explaining the Unsustainability of Ben Ali's Regime .....	5
2.1 The tacit social contract breaks .....	5
Dramatic rise in youth unemployment .....	5
Growing regional disparities .....	6
Erosion of the middle class.....	6
Inadequate and ineffective economic policies.....	6
2.2 Widespread corruption and the regime's control over the economy .....	7
2.3 Mobilisation from below: Spontaneous versus organised political mobilisation .....	8
3. The Challenges Ahead.....	9
3.1 The interim government .....	10
3.2 Security-related challenges.....	12
3.3 Constitutional reform and elections.....	14
3.4 The role of political parties and other civil society groups.....	15
3.5 The role of al-Nahda.....	17
3.6 Socio-economic problems .....	18
4. Possible Scenarios for the Future .....	21
References .....	24

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## Introduction

Owing to its impressive achievements in the areas of health, education and women's rights, for decades Tunisia projected an image of stability to the world, although this was at the cost of deep political regression. However, on 14 January 2011, after several weeks of anti-government protests, Tunisian President Ben Ali fled the country, revealing the fallacy of the 'Tunisian model'. While the departure of Ben Ali is an important step towards political change in Tunisia, the fate of its democratic transition remains uncertain. In light of these changes and challenges, this paper first assesses the factors underpinning the former stability of Ben Ali's regime; it then investigates the causes of its underlying unsustainability,<sup>1</sup> culminating in the popular anti-government uprising in December 2010-January 2011 and the removal of Ben Ali; finally the paper evaluates the prospects for a genuine democratic transition in Tunisia, by looking at the main political and socio-economic challenges that confront the country.

## 1. Behind the Veil of Stability of Ben Ali's Regime (1987-January 2011)

### 1.1 Tight and systematic control over political life

Since Ben Ali took power in 1987, dismissing as legally incompetent Habib Bourguiba, the regime systematically repressed any forms of political dissent.<sup>2</sup> During Ben Ali's rule, human rights activists, journalists and members of the opposition were subjected to constant surveillance, harassment and imprisonment. Physical and psychological torture in police stations was systematic as revealed by many (Kausch, 2009; EMHRN, 2010). Moreover, freedom of association was almost non-existent. With few exceptions, such as the Tunisian League for Human Rights, all organisations/associations that worked on political issues were denied legal registration (Kausch, 2009). Independent, but not recognised, organisations and opposition parties had a very limited margin for manoeuvre, since they were not allowed to hold public meetings or engage in any sort of public criticism of the regime (Kausch, 2009; EMHRN, 2010).

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\* Maria Cristina Paciello is research associate at Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Rome and lecturer in Economic and Political Geography of Development at La Sapienza University of Rome. The author is indebted to Dr Rym Ayadi and Dr Nathalie Tocci for their insightful comments.

<sup>1</sup> For insights on the analytical framework that informs this paper, including the distinction between short-term stability and long-term sustainability, see Silvia Colombo's paper (Colombo, 2010), published within the MEDPRO project.

<sup>2</sup> At the beginning, there were expectations that Ben Ali would have brought political reform. Initially, he released hundreds of political prisoners, including Islamists, allowed political exiles to return, recognised new opposition parties and negotiated a National Pact with the country's main political organizations, while he abolished the state security courts and the presidency for life. State controls over television and radio were also relaxed. For a review of this early phase of political liberalisation, see Alexander (1997); Murphy (1999); Layachi (2000); Sadiki (2002, 2003); Erdle (2004); and Brownlee (2005).

In addition, over the years, the regime exercised tight control over the media: no critical press or independent radio/television was allowed; and Internet censorship became extensive and sophisticated, with Interior Ministry agents routinely monitoring personal e-mail accounts, blocking sensitive websites and supervising Internet cafes to discourage criticism (EMHRN, 2010; author's interviews with political activists in Tunis, December 2010). The judicial system was manipulated, lacking any independence as the regime had the majority control of Tunisia's Superior Council of Magistrates, which nominates, assigns and disciplines the country's judges.<sup>3</sup>

While elections were held periodically (1989, 1994, 1999, 2004, 2009), the electoral system favoured the hegemony of the ruling party, the *Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique* (RCD), in the parliament (Murphy 1999; Layachi, 2000; Sadiki 2002, 2003; Chouikha, 2004, Boubekour, 2009). Although, since 1994, a limited number of legal parties was allowed to participate in elections, they were granted a minority quota of seats in parliament, based on their share of votes,<sup>4</sup> and only the RCD was able to obtain a majority. Furthermore, the quota of parliamentary seats assigned to opposition parties was to be divided among real opposition parties and pro-Ben Ali parties that backed the RCD (Boubekour, 2009). Despite an appearance of pluralism, the result was an uncompetitive electoral system, in which the few legal opposition parties were co-opted by the regime and had no impact on the legislative process.

Similarly, although, since 1999, multi-candidate presidential competitions were allowed, Ben Ali ran almost uncontested.<sup>5</sup> Opposition candidates, when not denied participation, were banned from campaigning openly through the media and rallies. Moreover, constitutional amendments to the electoral law ensured Ben Ali's continued re-election and prevented major opposition candidates from running in elections (see Gobe, 2009). In 2002, for example, a constitutional reform approved by referendum abolished the limit on the number of presidential mandates and raised the age limit to 75 years, thus allowing Ben Ali to run for more than three terms at the 2004 elections, while making the president immune from prosecution not only while in office but also after retirement (Chouikha, 2004). On March 2008, ahead of the presidential election scheduled for October 2009, a new law, stipulating that each presidential candidate had to be a party leader for at least two years, introduced stringent eligibility conditions for presidential candidates. As a consequence, two major opposition figures, Mustafa Ben Jaafar from the *Forum Démocratique pour le Travail et les Libertés* (FDTL), and Nejib Chebbi, head of the *Parti démocratique progressiste* (PDP), were prevented from running in elections, as both parties had gone through recent changes in leadership. The only genuine opposition candidate, Ahmed Brahim from *Ettajdid* (Movement for Renewal), complained about the authorities

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<sup>3</sup> "Politicised Tunis Judges get a Light Sentence", *Index Of Censorship*, 18/12/2010, <http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2010/12/politicised-tunis-judges-get-a-light-sentence-from-their-peers/>. See also Kausch (2009) and EMHRN (2010).

<sup>4</sup> In 1994, the quota system allocated 12% of the seats to legal parties other than the RCD. In 1999, this quota was raised to 19% and, in 2009, to 25%.

<sup>5</sup> In the October 1999 elections, Ben Ali won his third presidential term. His two opponents (Mohamed Belhaj of the *Parti de l'Unité Populaire*, PUP, and Abderrahmane Tlili, of *Union Démocratique Unioniste*, UDU) were deprived of access to the media and garnered less than 1% of the vote. Similarly, in the 2004 elections, Ben Ali faced only three candidates, two of whom were pro-government. The only genuine expression of opposition was Mohamed Ali Halouani, from *Ettajdid*, who obtained only 0.95% of the vote (Chouikha, 2004).

interfering in his campaign. In 2009, President Ben Ali won a fifth term, with a massive 89.62% support.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2 Weak opposition forces

The systematic repression of political opposition, combined with a lack of freedom of expression and association, significantly weakened Tunisian opposition forces and their capacity to criticise the regime, mobilise the population and build their political credibility.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, most Tunisians, intimidated by the repressive means used by the regime, suppresses their criticism of the government or simply became apathetic, having no hope for meaningful political change.<sup>8</sup>

As far as legal parties are concerned, apart from the ruling RCD, only six parties were represented in parliament and, among them, only three – the PDP, the FDLT and the *Ettajdid* – were genuinely critical of the regime and could be considered as independent. Yet, these legal parties were completely unable to influence the regime's agenda as the parliament lacked any meaningful power.

Moreover, unlike in other southern Mediterranean countries, where Islamists represent the most credible and effective form of opposition to authoritarian regimes, moderate Islamists in Tunisia played almost no political role. After an early period of reconciliation, since the early 1990s, Ben Ali's regime pursued a repressive and violent policy against the Islamist *al-Nahda* party. Accused of being linked to violent Islamist movements, by the mid-1990s, the organisation was dismantled, their leaders were forced into exile and many activists imprisoned and tortured. Over the years, the regime continued to refuse legalising *al-Nahda* as an official party and to repress its activists, using the Islamic threat to secure the support of the population and of the West, and justify its repressive methods. In addition, the Tunisian General Union of Labour or *Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens* (UGTT) was co-opted by the regime through government interference in the appointment of leaders and the persecution of independent members (Kausch, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2010). Yet, under Ben Ali's regime, political protests emerged only occasionally and were unable to mobilise large support because they were fragmented and restricted to the interests of specific professional categories (e.g. lawyers, judges, teachers, journalists) and to individual actions.<sup>9</sup> As a result, parliamentary and non-parliamentary opposition forces were unable, and sometimes unwilling, to mobilise large constituencies.

## 1.3 Social policy as a tool of legitimacy and control<sup>10</sup>

In the mid-1980s, like many other southern Mediterranean countries, Tunisia was faced with severe economic difficulties and, in 1986, started implementing stabilisation and market-oriented reforms, under the aegis of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Over

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<sup>6</sup> For more details see Boubekour (2009); Jamel Arfaoui, "Ben Ali enters Tunisian presidential race", *Magharebia*, 27 August ([http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml/en\\_GB/features/awi/features/2009/08/27/feature-01](http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml/en_GB/features/awi/features/2009/08/27/feature-01)).

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of the weak role of opposition forces, see Geisser & Gobe (2003, 2005); Chouikha (2004); and Sadiki (2003).

<sup>8</sup> Interviews by the author, December 2010, Tunis.

<sup>9</sup> See Geisser & Gobe (2005); author's interviews with academics and political activists in Tunis, December 2010.

<sup>10</sup> This is one of the main interesting arguments developed by Béatrice Hibou (2006) in her book *La force de l'obéissance: Economie Politique de la répression en Tunisie*, La Découverte, Paris.

the last two decades, Tunisia's macro-economic performance was positive. Most importantly, despite its structural adjustment programmes, the regime remained strongly committed to social spending. The level of public expenditure for social policies remained consistently high, at around 19% in 1987-2005 (Ben Romdhane, 2007). In particular, spending on education and health doubled during the 1986-2002 period, while expenditure on social welfare increased by 214%. Moreover, reductions in social spending on food subsidies (by 52% over 1986-2002) were compensated by increases in the minimum wage (*ibid.*). In addition to the National Programme for Aid to Needy Families created in 1986 to help the poor, Ben Ali also established two social programmes, such as the National Solidarity Fund, also known as '26-26' (1992) and the National Employment Fund, dubbed '21-21' (2000), to improve basic infrastructure in deprived areas and promote employment opportunities. As a result, overall income poverty in Tunisia was reduced and people's access to health and education significantly increased (see Ben Romdhane, 2007; Harrigan & el-Said, 2009). The population coverage of social security also saw remarkable progress over the years, being among the broadest in the Arab world (approximately 85% of the population, according to recent data) (Ben Romdhane, 2007).

While improving Tunisians' welfare, social policy was, first and foremost, an instrument of power and control in the hands of the regime (Hibou, 2006; Ben Romdhane, 2007). The generous social policies outlined above resulted in developing a sizeable middle class, which, in exchange for access to a relatively high level of social services and benefits, were aimed at compensating for the lack of civil and political liberties. Social policy thus served to discourage the emergence of a democratic order insofar as most Tunisians were willing to accept the lack of political freedom as the price to pay for socio-economic development and welfare (Ben Romdhane, 2007). Through the massive reduction of income poverty, the regime was also able to reduce the risk of social tensions, eventually inhibiting the chances for Islamists to gain terrain in poorer areas (Harrigan & el-Said, 2009). Yet, as Béatrice Hibou (2006) extensively demonstrates in her book, social policy was a key instrument of the regime's control over Tunisian society. Among others, the ruling party itself directly approved the list of families that benefited from state social services. Hence, those who were identified as political opponents were excluded from these programmes, while the many that acquiesced were compensated for their political silence (Hibou, 2006; Harrigan & el-Said, 2009; Boubekour, 2009; interviews with academics and political activists by the author in Tunis, December 2010).

#### **1.4 The EU's reluctance to promote real political change in Tunisia**

Despite its rhetorical support for democracy, the EU played a key role in maintaining Ben Ali's regime in power. With the view to prioritising economic reform and ensuring cooperation on geostrategic issues and domestic European interests (e.g. terrorism and illegal migration), the EU preferred "to maintain stability through the status quo, rather than risking the unpredictable outcomes that come with political reform" (Powel, 2009: 57). Although the commitment to promote democracy and human rights is clearly stated in the Barcelona Declaration and re-launched, with more explicit emphasis, in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU's support towards genuine political reform in Tunisia was tenuous and inconsistent at best (see EMHRN, 2010).

Under Ben Ali, Tunisia completely failed to meet its commitments towards the EU in the field of human rights and democracy. In spite of this, EU's declarations and reports were moderate in their criticism of the regime, while the EU never employed genuine pressure for real political change. A case in point is the EU's stated intention to proceed with an advanced agreement with Tunisia, although human rights violations and repression had intensified in recent years. The most 'political' issues mentioned in Tunisia's ENP Action Plan, were far removed from reforms

engendering substantive political transformation, being limited to rather technical governance issues such as the reform and modernisation of judicial system.<sup>11</sup> While important, the reform areas mentioned in the Action Plan entirely neglected the most pressing political questions in the country: the oppression of civil society and political parties, the deep flaws in the electoral system and the concentration of power in Ben Ali's hands.

## 2. Explaining the Unsustainability of Ben Ali's Regime

For 23 years, a combination of harsh repression and impressive socio-economic development ensured a certain level of stability of Ben Ali's regime. Moreover, in exchange for access to a relatively good level of social services and benefits, many Tunisian people acquiesced to the lack of civil and political freedoms. However, the above-described Tunisian model, while only apparently stable, proved to be unsustainable over the long term.

### 2.1 The tacit social contract breaks

Over the last decade, Tunisia experienced a rapid deterioration of socio-economic conditions, which accelerated in recent years. As the regime rested its legitimacy on ensuring a relatively high level of socio-economic development for the population, deteriorating living standards contributed to raise popular discontent and frustration, thus rendering the Tunisian model increasingly unsustainable. Tunisia's political system, apparently stable, revealed unsustainable because over the last decade the regime proved increasingly incapable of addressing the most prominent socioeconomic challenges facing the country. As socio-economic conditions worsened, the tacit social contract between Ben Ali and the Tunisian people, resting upon political repression in exchange for social benefits, was no longer acceptable, at least for a part of the population.

#### *Dramatic rise in youth unemployment*

Youth unemployment is one of the most prominent features that fed increased frustration and resentment among the Tunisian population. Although over the last decade, unemployment at the national level declined (from 15.8% in 1994 to 14.1% in 2007), the unemployment rate among the young, particularly those with secondary and higher education, increased dramatically (see Mahjoub, 2010).<sup>12</sup> The recent global financial crisis contributed to further intensify Tunisia's labour market challenges, raising further youth unemployment among graduates, while job creation significantly slowed down (from 80,000 jobs created in 2007 to 57,000 in 2009; see Banque Centrale Tunisienne, 2010). According to estimates based on data published during Ben Ali's era, youth unemployment among graduates increased from 8.6% in 1999 to 19.0% in 2007 (see Mahjoub, 2010), but, following the Tunisian revolution, new data have revealed a far more dramatic rise, from 22.1% in 1999 to 44.9% in 2009.<sup>13</sup> Yet even these new figures may underestimate the extent of youth unemployment, as they do not include many of those who, after failing to find work, have entered the informal economy or have chosen to migrate to Europe.

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<sup>11</sup> See European Commission, *Tunisia: Programme Indicatif National 2011-2013*, ([http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/country/2011\\_enpi\\_nip\\_tunisia\\_fr.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/country/2011_enpi_nip_tunisia_fr.pdf)); European Commission, *Tunisia: Country Strategy Paper 2007-2013 and National Indicative Programme 2007-2010*, ([http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/country/enpi\\_csp\\_nip\\_tunisia\\_summary\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/country/enpi_csp_nip_tunisia_summary_en.pdf)).

<sup>12</sup> The rate of unemployment among those aged 20 to 24 increased from 25.4% in 1994 to 30.2% in 2007, while, among those aged between 25-29, it rose from 17.4% to 23.9% (see Mahjoub, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> I. Haouari, "Ces chiffres qu'on ne nous a jamais révélés", *La presse de Tunisie*, 6 February 2011 (<http://www.lapresse.tn/06022011/21973/ces-chiffres-qu-on-ne-nous-a-jamais-reveles.html>).

### *Growing regional disparities*

Another major factor that undermined the regime's legitimacy and sustainability is the widening regional gap.<sup>14</sup> While it is true that, over the decades, the overall economic situation in Tunisia improved, regional disparities exacerbated. The north, north-west and centre-east, which benefited from particularly strong growth rates through tourism and offshore activities as well as from high public investment, are the regions that witnessed the most impressive drops in poverty levels. By contrast, in the south and centre-west of the country, poverty reduction was much slower. For example, in the north-west, the poverty rate decreased from 30% in 1980 to 3.7% in 2000, but in the south-west, poverty levels remained almost unchanged at a rate of 6.4% in 2000 compared to 6.7% in 1985 (Harrigan & el-Said, 2009).<sup>15</sup> The interior regions also reported the highest levels of unemployment, well above the national average of 14%. In 2007, unemployment reached 25.1% in Tozeur, 24.1% in Jandouba and 30% in the Gafsa region, where youth unemployment is said to peak at 40% (see Mahjoub, 2010; Amnesty International, 2009). Due to high unemployment and poverty rates, since 2008 Tunisia started experiencing protests in the poorest regions (such as in the southern mining region of Gafsa, in Skhira in the southeast, and in Ben Gardane), confirming that socio-economic conditions had become unbearable.<sup>16</sup>

### *Erosion of the middle class*

A third major factor that undermined Ben Ali's regime's stability is the gradual erosion of the Tunisian middle class (Marzouki, 2011; author's interviews with political activists in Tunis, December 2010). A number of signals confirm this trend. The implications of youth unemployment for the middle class's living standards were significant. As the coverage of social security to the Tunisian population depends on having a job in the formal economy, the increasing number of unemployed meant that a large number of Tunisians were deprived of these benefits (Ben Romdhane, 2007). In recent years, Tunisians' purchasing power was also hit hard by rising world food prices, albeit to a lower extent compared to other Arab countries. Salaries for many public sector workers became low mapped against the rising cost of living and were no longer sufficient to meet the rising consumption expectations of the Tunisian middle class, as the high level of private indebtedness suggests.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, in the context of the global crisis, the observed decline in remittances from Tunisians working abroad further worsened the living standards of many households depending on these incomes.

### *Inadequate and ineffective economic policies*

Although the regime continued to prioritise socio-economic issues in order to ensure its survival, its policies were ineffective in delivering a sustainable, well-balanced development for a number of structural, economic and political reasons.<sup>18</sup> Since 1987, Tunisia went through a

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<sup>14</sup> Author's interviews in Tunis, December 2010.

<sup>15</sup> We should note that official data on income poverty trends by region for the last decade are not available.

<sup>16</sup> See "Tunisie : Un rassemblement de jeune diplômés chômeurs de la ville de Skhira tourne à l'affrontement avec les forces de l'ordre", *Nawaat*, 4/02/2010 (<http://nawaat.org/portail/2010/02/04/tunisie-un-rassemblement-de-jeune-diplomes-chomeurs-de-la-ville-de-skhira-tourne-a-laffrontement-avec-les-forces-de-lordre/>); Christophe Ayad, "Face au gâchis social, la Tunisie ose s'insurger", *Tunisia Watch*, 22/12/2010 (<http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=3180>); Amnesty International (2009).

<sup>17</sup> Interviews with political activists by the author in Tunis, December 2010.

<sup>18</sup> For an explanation of political factors, see next section.



process of economic liberalisation, which accelerated in recent years. However, while promoting a relatively high level of economic growth, the market-oriented reforms implemented by the regime did not contribute to creating sufficient employment opportunities for a growing number of young educated Tunisians and for interior regions. The rise in exports was concentrated in low skills activities, such as clothes and agricultural products, providing little job opportunities for the highly educated newcomers in the labour market (Hedi Bchir et al., 2009; Lahcen, 2010), as well as for the interior regions, where scarce infrastructure made it difficult to attract export-oriented producers. The increase in FDI inflows in Tunisia, particularly over the last decade, did not boost job creation. This was because the driving force behind FDI in Tunisia was privatisation, rather than new investment opportunities (Hedi Bchir et al., 2009). As a result, privatisation programmes made no or limited contributions to job creation. In spite of market-oriented reforms aimed at promoting the private sector, private investment in Tunisia actually declined over the last decade (World Bank, 2007), thus hindering job creation. This, as we will see below, was inextricably tied to Tunisia's political context.

Another major problem hampering the regime's capacity to address emerging socio-economic challenges is the country's economic structure, highly dependent on the EU for exports, tourism revenues, remittances, and FDI inflows. This has made Tunisia potentially vulnerable to external shocks, particularly to fluctuations in EU growth. As a result, Tunisia felt the global crisis more acutely than other southern Mediterranean countries (e.g. Morocco, Algeria) (Paciello, 2010). For example, average real economic growth in Tunisia decreased from 6.3% in 2007 to 4.5% in 2008, to only 3.3% in 2009 (World Bank, 2010).

## 2.2 Widespread corruption and the regime's control over the economy

The economic and social failures described above were fundamentally the product of political factors. Widespread corruption, coercion and authoritarianism seriously inhibited the capacity of the Tunisian economy to ensure well-balanced development and sufficient jobs. Economic reforms were used primarily to redistribute privileges to the families of the president and his wife, to protect their vested interests, and to reinforce the regime's control over the private sector. In spite of market-oriented reforms, such as trade liberalisation and privatisation, Ben Ali and his families continued to exercise deep control over the private sector, adopting various instruments to inhibit their independence (coercive taxation, defamation, selectively redistributing benefits from economic policies, etc.) (see Hibou, 2004; 2006). This limited market competition, perpetuated inefficiencies in the economy and hindered the emergence of an autonomous and competitive private sector.<sup>19</sup> For example, one of the major factors behind the poor performance of private investment in Tunisia was the scale of corruption,<sup>20</sup> and lack of transparency and rule of law, which made many Tunisians and foreign entrepreneurs reluctant to invest in new business opportunities in the country. Similarly, the above mentioned '26-26' Fund was directly controlled by the RCD and was managed with little transparency. Many of its resources, instead of being spent on improving people's welfare were unaccounted and distributed through clientelist networks (Kallander, 2011).<sup>21</sup> Given that corruption and other by-products of the authoritarianism system generated deep flaws and inefficiencies in the economy,

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<sup>19</sup> Author's interviews with academics in Tunis, December 2010.

<sup>20</sup> To have an idea, see Robert F. Godec, "Corruption en Tunisie: Ce qui est à toi m'appartient", *Tunisia Watch*, 14 December 2010 (<http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=3166>).

<sup>21</sup> According to official estimates, the Fund collected an average of \$15-16 million per year in the late 1990s, yet the few economists who have attempted to calculate their own figures surmise that businesses alone contributed between \$24-38 million on an annual basis (Kallander, 2011). This point was confirmed by various interviews carried out by the author in Tunis, December 2010.

the country's socio-economic problems remained unaddressed. In view of high unemployment, nepotism became the main channel to distribute jobs and benefits under the strict control of the ruling party, fuelling increasing social frustration particularly among the young.<sup>22</sup>

### 2.3 Mobilisation from below: Spontaneous versus organised political mobilisation

Under Ben Ali, internal political and economic conditions hindered large organised political mobilisations against the regime. As discussed above, political de-mobilisation was one of the major factors that helped the regime to stay in power. However, the political void left by the absence both of organised strong opposition forces and of formal channels of political expression proved unsustainable in a context of deteriorating socio-economic conditions. As socio-economic problems and the regime's repression became unbearable for a part of the population, people's frustration and anger culminated in public unorganised protests against the regime. This pattern of mobilisation is evident in the events of December 2010-January 2011. The mobilisation was triggered by socio-economic grievances<sup>23</sup> and rapidly evolved in a spontaneous political movement, which was not organised by any formal political force.

The spread of the spontaneous mobilisation and its success were favoured by a number of factors. First, although the protests originated from socio-economic problems, they quickly became political in nature, embracing a large constituency, which transcended regional distinctions and ranged from jobless graduates and young students to independent unionists, journalists, teachers, lawyers and so on (Alexander, 2011; Marzouki, 2011). The fact that these protests were initially driven by socio-economic agenda and then escalated into political demands was a key factor in the success of the mobilisation.<sup>24</sup> In this regard, in spite of being controlled by the regime, the Tunisian General Union of Labour (UGTT) at the local level played a critical role in expanding the uprising and in putting forward political demands over and above social demands (Alexander, 2011).

Second, the fact that the regime reacted through disproportionate force against protesters,<sup>25</sup> particularly in the early phase of the uprising, causing numerous deaths, radicalised the movement and eroded what little was left of the regime's legitimacy. Successively, Ben Ali

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<sup>22</sup> For example, the protests that spread in the south-west of the Gafsa region in January 2008 were sparked by the results of a recruitment competition by the region's major employer the Gafsa Phosphate Company (GPC), with candidates protesting against what they considered to be unfair and fraudulent employment practices. The situation evolved into a wave of protests, joined by other unemployed, against corruption and the scarcity of employment opportunities for several months (Amnesty International, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> The young unemployed Mohammed Bouazizi who set himself on fire, triggering the movement, reflected the increased frustration and despair felt by the youth, while the protests emerged from one of the poorest regions of Tunisia, in the town of Sidi Bouzid.

<sup>24</sup> The protests started in the poorest regions of Tunisia in 2008 were focused on economic problems, with no clear political demands, and were harshly repressed. See "Tunisie : Un rassemblement de jeune diplômés chômeurs de la ville de Skhira tourne à l'affrontement avec les forces de l'ordre", *Nawaat*, 4/02/2010 (<http://nawaat.org/portail/2010/02/04/tunisie-un-rassemblement-de-jeune-diplomes-chomeurs-de-la-ville-de-skhira-tourne-a-laffrontement-avec-les-forces-de-lordre/>); Christophe Ayad, "Face au gâchis social, la Tunisie ose s'insurger", *Tunisia Watch*, 22/12/2010 (<http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=3180>); Amnesty International (2009).

<sup>25</sup> See for example, Yasmine Ryan, "Tunisia arrests bloggers and rapper", *al-Jazeera*, 7/01/2011 (<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2011/01/20111718360234492.html>); "Unemployment riots in Tunisia", *Arab Reform Bulletin*, 29/12/2010 (<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=42210>).

made some economic concessions,<sup>26</sup> but only in his last speech on 13 January, the day before his departure, did he make explicit political concessions, such as not presenting his candidature at the 2014 elections, conceding press freedom and ending internet censorship.<sup>27</sup> However, these concessions came too late and were no longer credible. Also, many protesters feared that they were reaching a point in which ending the protests would have generated more repression and more arrests in future.

Third, the army's refusal to intervene against protesters partly contributed to the success of the mobilisation. Because the army did not play a relevant political and economic role under Ben Ali's regime (by contrast to Egypt), it had few vested interests in the status quo (Kallander, 2011).<sup>28</sup> Relations between the army and Ben Ali in the past were known to have been tense.

Fourth, the social media such as Facebook and Twitter allowed protesters, particularly the young, to mobilise quickly even in the absence of organisational structures and were instrumental in spreading information about the upheaval both within and outside the country. In spite of the regime's restrictions over the media, many Tunisians were able to get round the regime's censorship so that information rapidly circulated among internet users, both internally and outside the country.<sup>29</sup>

### 3. The Challenges Ahead

On 14 January 2011, Ben Ali fled the country after several weeks of anti-government protests. The speaker of parliament, Fouad Mebazaa, has since assumed the role of interim president, and an interim government has been formed with the mandate to drive the early phase of political transition. While the process of democratic transition has begun, a number of political and socio-economic challenges may threaten its direction. The main risk in Tunisia's political transition lies in the uneasy coexistence of the old system of power with the emerging new one. As a result, the fate of Tunisia's political transition primarily depends on whether or not the country will be able to dismantle the previous power structure. The sections below illustrate the

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<sup>26</sup> On 9 January, the government declared to invest \$5 billion in development projects and to employ 50,000 university graduates in the next few months. On 10 January, Ben Ali also promised to create 300,000 jobs over the next two years ("Tunisia unemployment protests continue, at least 14 dead", *Arab Reform Bulletin*, 11/01/2011 (<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=42269>); "Tunisie: Ben Ali s'engage à créer 300 000 emplois entre 2011 et 2012", *Le Monde*, 10/01/2011 ([http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/10/tunisie-ben-ali-s-engage-a-creer-300-000-emploi-entre-2011-et-2012\\_1463646\\_3212.html#ens\\_id=1245377](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/10/tunisie-ben-ali-s-engage-a-creer-300-000-emploi-entre-2011-et-2012_1463646_3212.html#ens_id=1245377))).

<sup>27</sup> Politically, only after 16 days of violent protests in Sidi Bouzid, the regime responded with a new governor for Sidi Bouzid and only a minor cabinet reshuffle, marked mainly by the replacement of Communication Minister Oussama Romdhani with former Youth and Sports Minister Samir Laabidi, leaving people dissatisfied ([http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml/en\\_GB/features/aandwi/features/2010/12/30/feature-01](http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml/en_GB/features/aandwi/features/2010/12/30/feature-01)). On 12 January, Ben Ali replaced Minister of Interior, Rafik Haj Kacem, and announced the release of all prisoners arrested during the protests (Tunisie : le régime libère des manifestants mais emprisonne un dirigeant, *Le Monde*, 12/01/2011, ([http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/12/le-ministre-de-l-interieur-tunisien-limoge\\_1464465\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/12/le-ministre-de-l-interieur-tunisien-limoge_1464465_3212.html))). See also "Tunisie: Ben Ali promet de ne pas se représenter en 2014", *Le Monde*, 13/01/2011 ([http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/13/ben-ali-promet-de-passer-la-main-en-2014\\_1465345\\_3212.html#ens\\_id=1245377](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/13/ben-ali-promet-de-passer-la-main-en-2014_1465345_3212.html#ens_id=1245377))).

<sup>28</sup> Ben Ali over-invested in the police to control Tunisians to the detriment of investment in the military. The army included 36,000 soldiers and defence spending stood at 1.3% GDP (Kallander, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> On the role of social media in Tunisia protests, see, for example, Boris Vanenti, "Sidi Bouzid ou la révolte tunisienne organisée sur Facebook", 4/01/2011, [Nouvelobs.com](http://Nouvelobs.com).

principal challenges Tunisia has to overcome in order to successfully achieve its democratic transition and move towards a sustainable steady state.

### 3.1 The interim government

The interim government was established with the mandate to drive the early phase of the political transition and is expected to stay in power until the election of the national Constituent Assembly, which is scheduled for 24 July 2011 (see below). Since its inception, the interim government has been facing a number of difficulties, which have significantly undermined its credibility and support as well as its capacity to define a clear and consensus-based strategy. So far, there have been three interim governments. The main problem, particularly with the first two interim governments, lies in the fact that they were composed by members who were notoriously tied to the previous regime.

The first government, established on 17 January, was dissolved after ten days of popular protest, because, although it had nominated a number of ministers from former opposition parties, it was headed by Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi, who was a cabinet minister under Ben Ali, and was constituted by eight members of the old establishment who kept control of the most strategic ministries.<sup>30</sup> The second interim government was a step in the right direction compared to its predecessor, as the weight of the old establishment in key positions was reduced, regional representation of its members was widened, and civil society representatives were included. However, the interim government continued to be headed by Mohammed Ghannouchi and it did not completely eliminate the presence of people linked to the previous regime.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, although former opposition parties were included in the interim government, members of formerly banned parties and other new political forces were not. The interim government therefore continued to be largely unaccountable to Tunisians, although the UGTT and the former opposition parties under Ben Ali expressed their support for it.<sup>32</sup> As a result, many Tunisians continued to demand a radical change and did not trust the second interim government. Amidst anti-government protests, during which three people were killed, on 27 February, Prime Minister Ghannouchi was forced to announce his resignation, followed by the other two ministers who served under Ben Ali, namely the Industry Minister, Mohamed Afif Chelbi, and the International Cooperation Minister Mohamed Nouri Jouini.<sup>33</sup>

Reflecting its hybrid composition, the interim government under Mohammad Ghannouchi was hesitant and ambiguous in breaking with the old establishment, making concessions to the revolution without doing away with the old power system. On the one hand, in an attempt to respond to the protesters' demands, it took a number of measures. Amongst these we note the legalisation of an increasing number of political forces; an amnesty for political prisoners; the

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<sup>30</sup> Members of former opposition parties were Najib Chebbi, founder of the PDP nominated as Minister for Regional Development, and Ahmed Ibrahim, leader of the *Ettajdid* party, nominated as Minister of Higher Education. One day after the establishment of the first government, three members of the UGTT (M. Dimassi, Abdeljelil Bédoui and Anouar Ben Gueddour) resigned because they did not share the approach adopted by the new interim government. Their resignations were followed by the resignation of the head of the FDTL, who had been assigned the health portfolio.

<sup>31</sup> For the composition of the second interim government, see "Composition du gouvernement de transition Ghannouchi 2", *Tunisia Watch*, 29 January 2011 (<http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=3852>).

<sup>32</sup> Iheb Ettounsi, "Tunisians assess new government", *Magharebia*, 3/02/2011 ([http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en\\_GB/features/awi/features/2011/02/03/feature-01](http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/02/03/feature-01)).

<sup>33</sup> Two members of former-opposition parties, Najib Chebbi, the founder of the PDP, and Ahmed Ibrahim, the head of the *Ettajdid* Movement, also resigned to distance themselves from the interim government, followed by Elyès Jouini, Minister of Economic and Social Reforms.

establishment of three national committees, tasked respectively to inquire into human rights violations by police forces during protests, investigate into cases of embezzlement and corruption, and reform the constitution; raising the issue of an international arrest through Interpol for Ben Ali and several close relatives who fled the country;<sup>34</sup> and the arrest of some members of the former President's extended family.

On the other hand, the interim government led by Mohammad Ghannouchi was hesitant in distancing itself from the previous regime. It did not elaborate a clear schedule of reforms and deadlines for elections.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, with regard to the three committees, a number of concerns have been raised.<sup>36</sup> For example, the Committee on human rights violations is said to have neither the resources nor the personnel to confront the extensive security police. The Committee also has no legal authority and its mandate is limited.<sup>37</sup> In addition, while the government replaced 24 provincial governors, the newcomers were nominated with no prior consultation with political forces and 19 of them were selected from former members of the RCD, which triggered strong protests across various regions.<sup>38</sup> With regard to the former ruling party, the Interior Minister initially limited himself to suspend the activities of the RCD and, only on 21 February, formally presented a demand for its dissolution. Yet, no measure was taken to reform the old and repressive security apparatus, which was put in place by Ben Ali to intimidate and control the Tunisian people.

The interim government, currently headed by Beji Caid-Essebsi, has been sending some encouraging signals aimed at breaking with Ben Ali's regime. Although, apart from the six ministers who were left, the composition of the government remains unchanged,<sup>39</sup> the appointment of Beji Caid-Essebsi as Prime Minister was seen as a major improvement. He served in various positions under Habib Bourguiba and distanced himself from Ben Ali in 1994, when he retired from political life.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, shortly after the new cabinet was formed, the prime minister announced the dissolution of Ben Ali's political police and security apparatus, a central demand by protesters and political forces, thus building national consensus. By taking this historic measure, the current interim government appears to be moving in the right

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<sup>34</sup> For an update of the dossier under the current interim government, see "18 actions intentées contre le président déchu", *La Presse*, 14/04/2011.

<sup>35</sup> Only on 25 February, amidst growing anti-government protests, the interim government announced that legislative elections would be held by mid-July 2011.

<sup>36</sup> For a criticism of the Committee for Political Reform, see below. The Committee, set up to investigate corruption, interrupted its activities for unclear reasons on 5 March 2011, but, since 19 April, it has returned to operate ("Tunisie: Arrêt de la commission sur la corruption", *Tunisia Watch*, 6/03/2011 (<http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=4181>); "Les avocats désavoués par la justice dans l'affaire de la Commission d'investigation sur la corruption et la malversation", *Business News*, 19/04/2011).

<sup>37</sup> The Committee's mandate is restricted to investigating the violence committed by police units during the protests, but not to investigate and dismantle the secret police. ("Composition du gouvernement de transition Ghannouchi 2", *Tunisia Watch*, 29 January 2011, <http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=3852>; "Hedi Baccouche ou l'ombre de Ben Ali", *Tunisia Watch*, 27 January 2011 (<http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=3824&cpage=1#comment-8735>).

<sup>38</sup> "Nouveaux troubles en Tunisie", *Le Monde*, 8/02/2011 ([http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/02/08/tunisie-234-morts-depuis-le-debut-des-troubles\\_1477133\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/02/08/tunisie-234-morts-depuis-le-debut-des-troubles_1477133_3212.html)).

<sup>39</sup> For the composition of the new government, see "Tunisie: Essebsi forme son gouvernement provisoire", *Jeune Afrique*, 7/03/2011 (<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20110307170427/gouvernement-tunisie-ahmed-ibrahim-ministretunisie-essebsi-forme-son-gouvernement-provisoire.html>).

<sup>40</sup> Under Bourghiba, he served as a Minister of Interior, Foreign Minister and Minister of Defence. Under Ben Ali, he served as a President of the Chamber of Deputies from 1989 to 1991.

direction. However, whether or not, and to what extent, it will be able and willing to dismantle the previous power structure as a whole remain to be seen.

Young people, the major players of the Tunisian revolution, continue to ask for a completely new government, being suspicious about the interim government led by Beji Caid-Essebsi, who, given his age (84 years old) and past political career, is perceived to belong to the old system of power.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the old oligarchy still permeates the state apparatus, occupying key positions in the administration, the Interior Ministry, the media, the judiciary and so on. This means that the old guard is still in the position to influence the future direction of Tunisia's political transition. Major reforms in key strategic sectors such as the security, justice and media systems are required. For example, the reform of the justice system, which under Ben Ali lacked independence and transparency, has been so far neglected by interim authorities. Many activists, lawyers and judges have denounced the Ministry of Justice, still dominated by people of the previous regime, for being completely insensitive to any demands for reform.<sup>42</sup> Although, for the first time, on 7 April, the Justice Ministry decided to examine the demands put forward by magistrates and activists,<sup>43</sup> it is unclear whether or not it will accept them. In addition, given its limited mandate, the Committee that has been charged to investigate human right abuses during the December-January 2011 protests will continue to be ineffective and human rights violations perpetrated under the previous regime will remain unpunished, unless the justice system, which is the only responsible authority to investigate and take legal measures against these acts, is deeply reformed.

### 3.2 Security-related challenges

Since the departure of Ben Ali, the country has been plagued by a lack of security, although, at the time of writing in mid-April 2011, the security situation appears to have relatively improved. The state of insecurity has been due to a number of factors. Armed militias, who are presumed to be Ben Ali's loyalists and led by officials in the Interior Ministry, have sowed chaos and fear among the population.<sup>44</sup> These gangs probably aim at discrediting the interim government and highlighting its incapacity to restore order.

The state of insecurity also stems from the police force, which expanded significantly under Ben Ali, reaching an estimated 250,000. As many of the police forces have refused to resume work, owing to low wages and public stigma, several provinces have been left in a chaotic and

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<sup>41</sup> "Tunisie: 'Les jeunes ne se reconnaissent pas dans Béji Caïd Essebsi', *Le Monde*, 28/02/2011 ([http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/02/28/tunisie-la-pression-de-la-rue-ne-devrait-pas-diminuer\\_1486127\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/02/28/tunisie-la-pression-de-la-rue-ne-devrait-pas-diminuer_1486127_3212.html)).

<sup>42</sup> On 27 March, Tunisian judges and lawyers staged a rally in Tunis to call for an independent judicial system and to denounce lack of change since Ben Ali left. The 27 March was proclaimed the "National Day of Judicial Independence". Also see interview with the human rights activist Sihem Bensédrine, in "Sihem Bensédrine: 'La transition tunisienne va peut-être durer des années'", *Jeune Afrique*, 30/03/2011 (<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/>).

<sup>43</sup> "Tunisian magistrates suspend protest", *Magharebia*, 7/04/2011.

<sup>44</sup> See "Tunisia gripped by uncertainty", *Al Jazeera* 16/01/2011 (<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2011/01/20111167140864373.html>); Monia Ghanmi, "Tunisia offers concessions to security forces", *Magharebia*, 2/02/2011 ([http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en\\_GB/features/awi/features/2011/02/02/feature-01](http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/02/02/feature-01)); "Farhat Rajhi, ministre de l'Intérieur dévoile une dangereuse situation de défaillance sécuritaire dans le pays", *Tunisia Watch*, 2/02/2011 (<http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=3895>); "Tunisie: l'armée rappelle les réservistes", *Tunisia Watch*, 8/02/2011 (<http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=3988>).

unstable situation.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the so-called ‘political police’ and the repressive apparatus put in place by Ben Ali are reported to continue operating against Tunisian people, particularly the young.<sup>46</sup> This has further compromised the credibility of the interim government, as it is unclear who is behind these oppressive acts. An additional factor, which puts at risk Tunisia’s public order, is that many of the numerous prisoners (11,000) who escaped during the protest days have not been arrested yet.<sup>47</sup>

In an effort to address the above-mentioned security problems, the interim government under Mohammed Ghannouchi announced a number of measures late in early February 2011: it agreed to allow the security forces to establish a trade union to safeguard their rights as well as to raise salaries; it called in military reservists in order to beef-up the army; it announced that policemen would be fired for not showing up at work; and it fired security officials and nominated new officials. These measures, and particularly the redeployment of security forces, including the army, appear to have ameliorated, but not fully restored, the security situation in Tunis and in many interior regions, according to latest reports (dated mid-April 2011).<sup>48</sup>

The fate of Tunisia’s political transition will depend critically on the interim government’s capacity to restore security. A safe security environment is a necessary precondition for allowing fair and transparent elections, sustaining people’s support for a genuine democratic transition and escaping the risk of rising resentment among Tunisians themselves.<sup>49</sup> Restoring security, among others, will depend on the government’s ability, and political will, to identify who, in key security-related positions such as the Interior Ministry, continues to foment chaos. Moreover, the decision by the current interim government to dissolve the old and powerful security apparatus is a key move in the right direction. One of the main issues at stake is the reorganisation of the security apparatus to make it accountable to the rule of law, and transform

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<sup>45</sup> “Farhat Rajhi, ministre de l’Intérieur dévoile une dangereuse situation de défaillance sécuritaire dans le pays”, *Tunisia Watch*, 2/02/2011 <http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=3895>.

<sup>46</sup> Houda Trabelsi, “Tunisians remain wary of police”, *Magharebia*, 01/02/2011 ([http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en\\_GB/features/awi/features/2011/02/01/feature-01](http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/02/01/feature-01)); “Tunisia’s Police State Still In Place—Activists”, *Reuters*, 24/01/2011 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/01/24/us-tunisia-protests-security-idUSTRE70N6DS20110124>); “Ferhat Rajhi confirme la pratique de la torture, les arrestations arbitraires et la corruption”, *Tunis News*, 17/04/2011 (<http://www.tunisnews.net/17Avril11f.htm>); “Radhia Nasraoui, «En Tunisie, les tortionnaires agissent toujours»”, *La Croix*, 13/04/2011 (<http://www.la-croix.com/article/index.jsp?docId=2462469&rubId=55351>).

<sup>47</sup> In March 2011, the Interior Minister announced that about 2,000 of them were arrested, while, in mid-April, the Justice Ministry updated the total number of arrested people to 6,400 (“Tunisie: arrestation de plus de 2.300 pillards et détenus en fuite”, *Tunisia Watch*, 6/03/2011 (<http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=4185>); “18 actions intentées contre le président déchu”, *La Presse*, 14/04/2011).

<sup>48</sup> Yasser Maarouf, “Insécurité, braquages, ordures, grèves sauvages: Ça en fait trop”, *Le Temps*, 14/04/2011 (<http://www.letemps.com.tn/article-55014.html>).

<sup>49</sup> The case of the Polish priest, found dead on 18 February, clearly shows this risk. The Interior Minister condemned the murder and declared: “Given the manner of his murder we believe that a group of fascist terrorists are behind the crime”, intending that behind there were the Islamists, but numerous people claimed the murder was carried out by militias loyal to Ben Ali in order to create anarchy and chaos in the country (“Tunisie: manifestation contre le gouvernement, messe pour le prêtre égorgé”, *Tunisia Watch*, 20/02/2011 (<http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=4082>)). Similarly, Sihem Bensédrine, a human rights activist, denounces infiltrations of the political police in the attacks against the synagogue (11 February, 2011), against women’s demonstrations and other circumstances, which all aimed to spread divisions among Tunisians. (“Sihem Bensédrine : ‘La transition tunisienne va peut-être durer des années’”, *Jeune Afrique*, 30/03/2011 (<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/>)).

it into a body that protects, rather than intimidates, Tunisian citizens. However, beyond announcements, the interim government needs to be more transparent on how it aims to pursue this goal. For example, it is unclear why Beji Caid-Essebsi sacked the popular Minister of Interior, Farhat Rajhi, and replaced him with Habib Essid, who served as a private secretary of the Interior Ministry under Ben Ali during 1997-2000.<sup>50</sup> A final area of concern regards the massive flow of refugees from Libya, following the Libyan regime's harsh repression against the political upheaval in the country, which could aggravate Tunisia's security-related problems.

### 3.3 Constitutional reform and elections

Legislative elections are crucial in determining the direction of the political transition in Tunisia. Preparing the ground for free, transparent and representative elections is the main issue at stake. The first, and most urgent step, to favour representative elections is the reform of the constitution, which was carefully manipulated by Ben Ali to ensure the hegemony of the RCD and to impose stringent limits for presidential elections. Following the establishment of the interim government, a High Committee for Political Reform was established to revise the constitution, including the electoral law, the law on political parties, etc, while legislative elections were initially scheduled for mid-July 2011. However, since the inception of the Committee, many Tunisians questioned its independence and its capacity to produce a deep and widely approved reform of the constitution, given that it was not established in consultation with diverse political forces,<sup>51</sup> and, while the head of the Commission, Yadh Achour, is an eminent independent scholar, whose father and grandfather were Grand Muftis of Tunisia, some of its experts were very close to Ben Ali.<sup>52</sup> With regard to the election schedule, there was a widespread feeling among political activists that five months were too short a time to allow new political forces to campaign and organise effectively.

After persistent protests, on 4 March, interim President Mebazaa announced the popular election of a Constituent Assembly to be held on 24 July 2011, instead of legislative elections. The Assembly would rewrite the constitution and nominate a new president and interim government. After the Constituent Assembly is elected and a new constitution drafted, parliamentary and presidential elections would be held. Such a decision is an important step forward in Tunisia's political transition. It fulfils one of the major demands made by protesters and political forces, highlighting the capacity of civil society in general to bargain vis-à-vis the interim government. Moreover, the historic process of rewriting the Tunisian constitution needs to be as inclusive as possible in order to enjoy large consensus and legitimacy among Tunisians. The decision to hold popular elections for a Constituent Assembly totally reverses the previous decision by the interim authorities to nominate a Committee for political reform without the involvement of political and social forces, let alone the public.

In the long-term, the direction of Tunisia's political transition will depend much on the content of the new constitution. In the short term, the composition of the future Assembly is key, affecting both the content of the new Constitution and the degree of inclusiveness of the process leading to it. There are positive signals in this regard. Under the pressure from a range of

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<sup>50</sup> Some argue, for example, that it is no coincidence that after the appointment of Essid demonstrations by young activists on 1 April were violently repressed by the police. "La Tunisie renoue avec la répression policière" *in Tunis News* 3/04/2011 (<http://www.tunisnews.net/03Avrill11f.htm>).

<sup>51</sup> See "Tunisie: Plusieurs partis et organisations appellent à la création d'un « Conseil national pour la protection de la révolution »", *Tunisia Watch*, 15/02/2011 (<http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=4047>).

<sup>52</sup> "Commission Nationale Supérieure de la Reforme: Ces Enseignants de Droit qui ont retourné leur veste", *Tunisia Watch*, 2/02/2011 (<http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=3917>).



political and social forces, the Commission<sup>53</sup> in charge of drafting and approving the electoral law for the Constitutional Assembly,<sup>54</sup> has incorporated, in addition to members tied to the old regime, representatives of civil society, including the UGTT, the National Order of Lawyers, and of a number of political parties as well as youth, women and regional movement representatives, who were previously excluded.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the electoral decree for the Constitutional Assembly, which was approved by the Commission on 11 April 2011, excludes as candidates anybody who served during the past 23 years in the government under Ben Ali or had senior positions in the former ruling party. It also disqualifies as candidates those who supported the re-election of Ben Ali as a president in 2014 elections. In addition, it introduces the parity between men and women for the electoral lists as well as it adopts an electoral system based on proportional representation that may allow a broad spectrum of political forces to be elected in the Constituent Assembly. However, the principle of gender parity is controversial in so far as, while ensuring female representation in the Constituent Assembly, it could benefit well-established political formations that are said to have more chance to mobilise women across the country.<sup>56</sup> Also the electoral system based on proportional representation could significantly threaten the Constituent Assembly's capacity to take decisions owing to the presence of a large number of political forces.<sup>57</sup> Yet, because the High Committee has only consultative powers, to become operative, the electoral law will need approval by the interim authorities,<sup>58</sup> which could decide to modify or refuse the above rules, as the Prime Minister argued in various interviews.<sup>59</sup>

### 3.4 The role of political parties and other civil society groups

The trajectory of Tunisia's political transition will also depend on the current and future role played by political and social forces and, particularly, on the extent to which they will be able to shape the course of political events. A major factor, which may compromise the outcome of Tunisia's political transition, is the fact that existing political forces are still weak, lacking financial resources, experience and a clear political agenda. Many opposition activists who were

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<sup>53</sup> It is called the Commission for the Realisation of Revolutionary Goals, Political Reforms and Democratic Transition ("Instance supérieure pour la réalisation des objectifs de la Révolution, de la réforme politique et de la transition démocratique"), which was previously called the National Committee for Political Reform ("Commission Nationale pour la Réforme Politique"), one of the three Committees created by Mohammed Ghannouchi.

<sup>54</sup> Actually, the electoral law was drawn up by a sub-committee of experts within the Commission.

<sup>55</sup> On 26 March, the number of its members was raised from 71 to 145. "Tunisia to expand transitional commission", *Magharebia*, 27/03/2011 ([http://magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en\\_GB/features/awi/newsbriefs/general/2011/03/27/newsbrief-03](http://magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/newsbriefs/general/2011/03/27/newsbrief-03)). For a list of its members, see "Instance Yadh Ben Achour: la dernière liste actualisée des membres du Conseil", *Tunis News*, 29/03/2011 (<http://www.tunisnews.net/29Mars11f.htm>).

<sup>56</sup> "Elections de l'assemblée constituante: Polémiques autour de l'exclusion des Récédistes et de la représentativité féminine", *Tunis News*, 19/04/2011 (<http://www.tunisnews.net/19Avril11f.htm>).

<sup>57</sup> For a review on the main issues at stake, see Bechir Chourou, "Quelques propositions relatives à l'Assemblée constituante", *al Nawaat*, 21/03/2011 (<http://nawaat.org/portail/2011/03/21/quelques-propositions-relatives-a-l-assemblee-constituante>); "M. Abdessattar Ben Moussa, ex-bâtonnier et membre de l'Instance supérieure de la réalisation des objectifs de la Révolution, de la réforme politique et de la transition démocratique", *Le Temps*, 18/04/2011 (<http://www.letemps.com.tn/article-55123.html>).

<sup>58</sup> At the time of finalising the paper, on 22 April 2011, the interim government decided to postpone the announcement regarding its decision on the electoral code to 26 April ("Il est grand temps...", *La Presse*, 23/04/2011 (<http://www.lapresse.tn/23042011/il-est-grand-temps....html>)).

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, *Tunis News*, 12/04/2011 and 18/04/2011 (<http://www.tunisnews.net/>).

ostracised by Ben Ali have been allowed to return to the country and have obtained, or are awaiting, the legalisation of their political parties. To date (on 4 April 2011), 51 political parties have obtained legalisation.<sup>60</sup> While it is still unknown which of these parties will be able to participate in the elections for the Constituent Assembly and the parliament, what their popular support will be, and who they will field as candidates, the old independent political parties are likely to have more chances to enter such institutions, and present successful candidates. Moreover, the extensive number of parties may increase the difficulty of new parties to build their constituencies. Given the pace of events, most Tunisians are still unaware about the changing political landscape in their country and the majority claim to know only three parties, namely the former ruling party, the PDP and *al-Nahda*.<sup>61</sup> The risk is that the Constitutional Assembly and, successively, the new parliament, emerging from the next elections will not be as representative as expected, because most parties will be unable to organise, find adequate candidates and resources, and campaign.<sup>62</sup>

Yet the dissolution of the RCD, which finally took place on 9 March, will not be sufficient to dismantle the past power system.<sup>63</sup> One can expect that members of the former ruling party will create new political parties, as seems to be the case for Kamel Morjane, who was former minister under Ben Ali and, recently, obtained the legalisation for a new party “L’Initiative”, but the extent to which these parties will break with the past is an open question. Given that the former ruling party was financially strong, well-organised and structured, it is reported to be in the position to exploit the weaknesses of the other political forces in order to gain votes in the next elections.<sup>64</sup> However, if the provision banning senior members of the RCD from upcoming elections is accepted by the interim government, this could partially contribute to undermine its capacity to re-emerge under new shapes.

On the positive side, civil society in Tunisia, including both political parties and social forces, have so far played an important role in the transition, displaying great vitality and capacity to bargain vis-à-vis the interim government. Their contribution will continue to be critical in facilitating Tunisia’s transition to democracy. Thanks to their persistent protests and pressures, the interim authorities have been forced to make important concessions in recent weeks such as the dissolution of the security system and the decision to hold elections for the Constituent Assembly. Various political parties and civil society organisations, including the UGTT, initially regrouped under the Council for the Protection of the Revolution,<sup>65</sup> with the aim to monitor and criticise the interim authorities. They were then incorporated in the Committee in charge of drafting and approving the electoral law for the Constitutional Assembly.

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<sup>60</sup> For a full list of these parties, see “Fiche d’identité des 51 partis, leurs fondateurs, leurs idéologies”, *Business News* (<http://www.businessnews.com.tn/pdf/Partis040411.pdf>). We remind that the interim government refused to legalise three Islamist political parties on the basis that they did not comply with the law banning the creation of political parties on the basis of religion.

<sup>61</sup> See for example “Sondage: La Justice au premier plan des préoccupations des tunisiens après la révolution”, *Tunisia Watch*, 21/03/2011 (<http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=4227>).

<sup>62</sup> It is interesting to note that, to date, almost none of the new political parties have a website and very few of the ones which do present a clear political programme; see *Tunisia News*, 30/03/2011 (<http://www.tunisnews.net/30Mars11f.htm>).

<sup>63</sup> “Le gouvernement tunisien demande la dissolution du Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique (RCD)”, *Tunisian Watch*, 22/02/2011, <http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=4097>. Before the demand for its dissolution, the RCD was suspended on the 7<sup>th</sup> of February.

<sup>64</sup> H. Khaznagi, “Tunisie : La dissolution du RCD, une opportunité ou un piège ?”, *Nawaat*, 10/02/2011 (<http://nawaat.org/portail/2011/02/10/tunisie-la-dissolution-du-rcd-une-opportunite-ou-un-piege/>).

<sup>65</sup> Called the Conseil national de protection de la Révolution, it was established in February 2011.

However, caution is needed insofar as civil society is politically and socially heterogeneous. Most existing civil society groups were closely linked to the previous system of power. For example, as argued by Steven Heydemann (2011) in the very early days after Ben Ali's departure, the UGTT was deeply tied to the old order, being part of the regime's strategy to demobilise "any organized interests that might threaten the regime". In this regard, Abdesslem Jrad, secretary general of the UGTT, who was deeply entrenched within the previous regime, has not abandoned his position in the organisation, in spite of numerous criticisms. This said, the political role of the UGTT as a whole is fairly ambiguous, given that the organisation includes representatives with different political stances, from members and supporters of the former ruling party to communists, other leftwing parties, and Islamists.<sup>66</sup>

### 3.5 The role of al-Nahda

Another political actor that has attracted considerable attention, both within Tunisia and outside, is the Islamist *al-Nahda*. In fact, despite the fact that Tunisia's current political landscape is populated by numerous parties, much attention and concern has focused on *al-Nahda*, given the widespread view that Islamist parties may seriously threaten Arab countries' transition to democracy. This author believes that *al-Nahda's* full inclusion in the process of political transformation is a necessary step in order to allow for Tunisia's successful democratic transition, provided that the new Constitution makes sure that strong checks and balances are in place. Cutting off official political avenues to moderate Islamists could have serious costs in the long term, eventually leaving the room open to more radicalised expressions of Islamism. The formal procedures for a full integration of *al-Nahda* into the process of political transition have been ongoing: Rachid Ghannouchi returned to Tunisia after 22 years of exile on 30 January; and the government approved the amnesty for political prisoners, who mainly include moderate Islamists on 18 February 2011; and the permission for the legalisation of the party was granted on 1 March 2011. Since 9 April, *al-Nahda* also started to publish its newspaper *al-Fajr*, banned in Tunisia in 1991.

*Al-Nahda's* strategy with regard to the process of political transformation appears so far to be very moderate. In various interviews, al-Ghannouchi has confirmed the movement's intention to work with other forces in the country, support the rules of the democratic game and protect Tunisia's progressive Personal Status Code.<sup>67</sup> He also expressed admiration for Turkey's Justice and Development Party.<sup>68</sup> Strategically, the leaders of *al-Nahda* have declared that the priority will be to rebuild the movement and that they will not present candidates for presidential elections.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Michael Allen, "Tunisian unions eclipsing parties as democratizing force?", *Democracy Digest*, 24/01/2011 (<http://www.demdigest.net/blog/2011/01/tunisian-unions-eclipsing-parties-as-democratizing-force-2/>).

<sup>67</sup> Ghannouchi declared that "Nous ne voulons pas d'un régime à parti unique, quel qu'il soit, ni instaurer la charia [loi islamique]. Ce dont la Tunisie a besoin aujourd'hui, c'est de liberté et (...) d'une véritable démocratie" (in "Arrivée à Tunis de la caravane de la libération", *Le Monde*, 23/01/2011 ([http://www.lemonde.fr/tunisie/article/2011/01/23/arrivee-a-tunis-de-la-caravane-de-la-liberation\\_1469466\\_1466522.html#ens\\_id=1245377](http://www.lemonde.fr/tunisie/article/2011/01/23/arrivee-a-tunis-de-la-caravane-de-la-liberation_1469466_1466522.html#ens_id=1245377))).

<sup>68</sup> See Jamestown Foundation, "*Tunisia's Battered Islamist Movement Seeks a Place in the Era of Change*", *Terrorism Monitor* Volume 9 Issue 5,4 February 2011 (<http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4d4f982c2.html>).

<sup>69</sup> "Tunisie: l'islamiste Rached Ghannouchi ne sera pas candidat à la présidence", *Le Monde*, 30/01/2011 ([http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/30/tunisie-l-islamiste-rached-ghannouchi-ne-sera-pas-candidat-a-la-presidence\\_1472796\\_3212.html#ens\\_id=1245377](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/01/30/tunisie-l-islamiste-rached-ghannouchi-ne-sera-pas-candidat-a-la-presidence_1472796_3212.html#ens_id=1245377)).

There are a number of issues at stake concerning *al-Nahda*, which become clearer over the next months and whose evolution will shape Tunisia's political transition. First, while *al-Nahda*'s strategy and its ideology are still fairly vague, they are expected to become more elaborated and explicit by next summer, on the occasion of its General Congress.<sup>70</sup> Second, while, due to the long time in exile, the extent of the popular support enjoyed by *al-Nahda* is difficult to estimate, this will become more apparent in the coming months. Given its long absence from the country, like other political forces, the Islamist movement may lack a large constituency. However, as others argue, in addition to growing religious conservatism in Tunisia, the fact that the movement was persecuted for so long by the regime could have raised its popularity.<sup>71</sup> Yet, much of *al-Nahda*'s popularity also depends on the way the interim and future authorities will conduct the political transition and their specific choices regarding the inclusion or marginalisation of the movement.

Third, the evolution of relations between *al-Nahda* and other political forces is also a key issue for the future of the political transition. Divergent attitudes among political forces towards *al-Nahda* are prominent and could slow down the democratic process. However, the chances for broad cooperation across all political forces, including *al-Nahda*, should not be ruled out. The experience of the *18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms*, formed in 2005 and rallying political opponents of diverse, and even contradictory, ideological orientations, ranging from the extreme left to moderate Islamists, to call for more civil liberties and an end to torture, suggests that cooperation between secular and Islamist forces is feasible. *Al-Nahda* has expressed its intention to collaborate with all parties in order to achieve the objectives of the revolution.<sup>72</sup>

### 3.6 Socio-economic problems

The economic repercussions of political events over the last three months have been dramatic. During the first two weeks of Tunisia's popular upheaval, an estimated 4.5% GDP was lost.<sup>73</sup> For 2011, GDP's growth is foreseen to decline significantly, averaging between 0.0 and 1%, down from 5.4%, which was previously forecasted in the 2011 budget law.<sup>74</sup> As a result, job creation for 2011 is expected to decrease dramatically and unemployment to increase by 5 percentage points by July 2011.<sup>75</sup> Tourism, which under Ben Ali contributed to 6.8% GDP and employed 350,000 people, has slowed down drastically, with obvious negative implications on the country's revenues and labour market.<sup>76</sup> FDI and exports, especially of textiles and

<sup>70</sup> Some leaders of the movement declared that the Congress will profoundly revise its ideology, as the last discussion goes back to 1986 (interview with Alaya Allani in *Die Welt*, 3/02/2011).

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Alaya Allani in *Die Welt*, 3/02/2011. Allani estimates that in the next elections, the movement could obtain about 20-25% of the popular vote.

<sup>72</sup> See "Tunisie: le mouvement Ennahdha se dote de nouvelles structures dirigeantes", *Tunisia Watch*, 7/02/2011 (<http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=3995>).

<sup>73</sup> "Transcript of a Press Briefing by David Hawley, Senior Advisor, External Relations Department", International Monetary Fund, Washington, DC, 20 January 2011 (<http://www.imf.org/external/np/tr/2011/tr012011.htm>).

<sup>74</sup> "Les 17 nouvelles mesures économiques et sociales d'urgence décidées par le gouvernement", 1/04/2011 (<http://leaders.com.tn/article/les-17-nouvelles-mesures-economiques-et-sociales-d-urgence-decidees-par-le-gouvernement>).

<sup>75</sup> "Tunisie: Déblocage des subventions pour 127 mille chômeurs dans les prochains jours", 4/04/2011, *Business News* (<http://www.businessnews.com.tn>); "Les 17 nouvelles mesures économiques et sociales d'urgence décidées par le gouvernement", 1/04/2011 (<http://leaders.com.tn/article/les-17-nouvelles-mesures-economiques-et-sociales-d-urgence-decidees-par-le-gouvernement>).

<sup>76</sup> "No one is really in charge: The revolution is still in flux", *The Economist*, 27/01/2011

automobile supplies, have been badly hit.<sup>77</sup> Generally, all economic activities have incurred dramatic losses due to growing insecurity and curfews, while during the upheavals, 15,000 became unemployed.<sup>78</sup> As a result of declining tourism revenues, FDI and exports, there has been a sharp rise in the balance of payments deficit, while the budget deficit is expected to increase dramatically owing to increases in public expenditures to cope with the crisis and drops in public revenues.<sup>79</sup>

The country now faces a double challenge: coping with the economic crisis, which was inevitably caused by the political upheaval, and addressing structural socio-economic problems, which have been inherited by the previous regime and contributed to its demise. Unless these problems are tackled effectively, Tunisia's political transition may be at risk. Owing to deteriorating socio-economic conditions, wage and labour protests in the forms of sit-ins, occupations, etc have been mounting in the country, in both local and foreign enterprises, contributing to insecurity and chaos. The risk is that conservative forces in the country can exploit growing social tensions as an excuse to convince the majority of Tunisians that stability and security are preferable than radical political change.

Recent political events in Libya, which is Tunisia's first Arab and African trading partner, have been damaging further Tunisia's economy. Regions in the south (e.g. Ben Guardane) have been hardly hit, given their strong trade and investment relations with Libya.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, about 40,000 Tunisians working in Libya are reported to have returned to their country, thus adding pressure on the labour market. Tourism will be also negatively affected, given that, every year, almost 2 million Libyans visit Tunisia.<sup>81</sup>

The interim government under Mohammed Ghannouchi announced numerous measures to deal with Tunisia's socio-economic problems in an attempt to placate social discontent: unemployment benefits for unemployed college graduates in exchange for part-time volunteer work;<sup>82</sup> an unprecedented investment plan to promote development in the poorest regions; compensation for the families of the victims of the protests; social negotiations in response to

(<http://www.economist.com/>). "Les 17 nouvelles mesures économiques et sociales d'urgence décidées par le gouvernement", 1/04/2011 (<http://leaders.com.tn/article/les-17-nouvelles-mesures-economiques-et-sociales-d-urgence-decidees-par-le-gouvernement>).

<sup>77</sup> FDI, for example, are said to have declined by 28.8% during January-March 2011 compared to the corresponding period in 2010 ("Tunisie: l'investissement étranger a plongé au 1er trimestre", *Tunis News*, 13/04/2011 (<http://www.tunisnews.net/13Avril11f.htm>), while exports dropped by 26% during the same period ("Tunisie: corrélation entre transition démocratique et dynamisme économique", *La Presse*, 12/04/2011 (<http://www.lapresse.tn/>). See also "Les 17 nouvelles mesures économiques et sociales d'urgence décidées par le gouvernement", 1/04/2011 (<http://leaders.com.tn/article/les-17-nouvelles-mesures-economiques-et-sociales-d-urgence-decidees-par-le-gouvernement>).

<sup>78</sup> African Development Bank Group, *Press Statement on Tunisia*, 14/02/2011 (<http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Generic-Documents/PRST%20Press%20Statement%20%20Feb%202011%20final%20ENG.pdf>).

<sup>79</sup> Tunisia's budget deficit is expected to reach 5% of GDP at the end of 2011, up from 2.5%, which was previously forecasted in the 2011 budget law (see "Les 17 nouvelles mesures économiques et sociales d'urgence décidées par le gouvernement", 1/04/2011 (<http://leaders.com.tn/article/les-17-nouvelles-mesures-economiques-et-sociales-d-urgence-decidees-par-le-gouvernement>).

<sup>80</sup> "Tunisie-Libye : les échanges perturbés", *Investir en Tunisie* (<http://www.investir-en-tunisie.net>).

<sup>81</sup> "Tunisie - La crise libyenne et les revendications sociales fragilisent l'économie", *Maghreb Emergent*, 4/04/2011 (<http://www.maghrebemergent.info/economie/73-tunisie/2815-tunisie-la-crise-libyenne-et-les-revendications-sociales-fragilisent-leconomie.html>).

<sup>82</sup> The interim government started to pay unemployment benefits in April ("Tunisia pays unemployment benefits", *Magharebia*, 17/04/2011).

the growing number of workers' strikes demanding better salaries; the launching of an online campaign to revive tourism; and the creation of the 'Citizenship Fund 111' for voluntary donations to help the post-revolution economic recovery.<sup>83</sup> While these measures can be considered as purely palliative and uncoordinated responses, Tunisia needs a broad and coherent strategy, specifically targeted at reducing youth unemployment, narrowing regional disparities and diversifying its economic structure.

The package of short-term measures launched by Minister of Finance Jalloul Ayed on 1 April is the first attempt made by interim authorities to provide a coherent response to pressing economic and social problems. Although, at the time of writing, it is still unclear whether and which measures will be implemented, the programme sets up the following priority actions:<sup>84</sup> i) restoring security; ii) creating 40,000 jobs, through increased investment in public utilities particularly in the poorest regions, the recruitment of 20,000 young people into the public sector and the reactivation of a number of active labour market programmes; iii) supporting measures to re-launch the private sector and the national economy, including fiscal and financial incentives to encourage private investment in regional development zones; iv) promoting regional development by more than doubling public investment;<sup>85</sup> and v) various social assistance actions targeted to needy families as well as to Tunisians returning from Libya.

While it is early to assess the effectiveness of such measures, coping with Tunisia's main socio-economic challenges requires, above all, a profound restructuring of its political economy so as to deal with widespread corruption and allow a new private independent sector to emerge. For example, in the absence of this radical change, the above-mentioned Citizenship Fund could simply replicate Ben Ali's '26-26' Fund, diverting collected resources to ends other than their intended use.<sup>86</sup> Yet, a radical change of Tunisia's political economy is difficult to implement, at least rapidly and needs a concerted effort, given the persistent links between the current government and the old elites. The strategic alliance between the Tunisian private sector that was supported by the previous regime, and foreign entrepreneurs, could make things even more difficult (Cassarino, 2011). Moreover, political forces in Tunisia still lack clear and detailed

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<sup>83</sup> "Tunisie: allocations pour les chômeurs diplômés", *Tunisia Watch*, 25/01/2011 (<http://www.tunisiawatch.com/?p=3805>); "Tunisie : le président annonce des négociations sociales", *Le Monde*, 9/02/2011, ([http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/02/09/en-tunisie-l-executif-pourra-gouverner-sans-le-parlement\\_1477557\\_3212.html#ens\\_id=1245377](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/02/09/en-tunisie-l-executif-pourra-gouverner-sans-le-parlement_1477557_3212.html#ens_id=1245377)); Houda Trabelsi, "I Love Tunisia' campaign eyes tourism revival", *Magharebia*, 18/02/2011 ([http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en\\_GB/features/awi/features/2011/02/18/feature-01](http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/02/18/feature-01)); Mohamed El Hedef, "Tunisia launches economic recovery fund", *Magharebia*, 17/02/2011 ([http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en\\_GB/features/awi/features/2011/02/17/feature-01](http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/02/17/feature-01)); "Fonds citoyen 111.

200.000 dinars mobilisés", *La Presse*, 25/03/2011 (<http://www.lapresse.tn/25032011/25435/200.000-dinars-mobilises.html>).

<sup>84</sup> For details, see "Les 17 nouvelles mesures économiques et sociales d'urgence décidées par le gouvernement", 1/04/2011 (<http://leaders.com.tn/article/les-17-nouvelles-mesures-economiques-et-sociales-d-urgence-decidees-par-le-gouvernement>).

<sup>85</sup> The interim government decided to devote 251,3 millions Tunisian dinars to regional development, whereas the 2011 budget law approved under Ben Ali had planned to invest 129,8 millions dinars ("Tunisie: le gouvernement rééquilibre le développement régional", *Tunis News*, 11/04/2011, (<http://www.tunisnews.net/11Avril11f.htm>).

<sup>86</sup> Mohamed El Hedef, "Tunisia launches economic recovery fund", *Magharebia*, 17/02/2011 ([http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en\\_GB/features/awi/features/2011/02/17/feature-01](http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/02/17/feature-01)).

socio-economic programs,<sup>87</sup> and, in next months, they are likely to focus their energies on political matters, with the risk of neglecting socio-economic questions and therefore leave business cronies intact.

However, there are a number of positive developments, even though assessing their impact on Tunisia's socio-economic conditions is premature. As Jean-Pierre Cassarino (2011: 7) reports in his paper, "a growing number of Tunisian entrepreneurs, who directly or indirectly suffered from tax aggressiveness and administrative harassment in the past, are organizing themselves to monitor the interim government's willingness to inquire into cases of embezzlement and corruption during the former regime". Furthermore, aside the UGTT, a new trade union, the *Confédération générale tunisienne du travail*, has been created.<sup>88</sup> The emergence of dynamic and independent associations of both workers and entrepreneurs could contribute to initiate a constructive social dialogue to address labour protests, reorient public policies toward a more inclusive agenda and build an alternative to the old system. Moreover, the interim government's authorisation to seize assets belonging to Ben Ali and his family, announced on 31 March, could make a large amount of resources available to deal with pressing economic and social problems,<sup>89</sup> provided that these assets are managed transparently.

#### 4. Possible scenarios for the future

As seen above, Tunisia is faced with a number of challenges that may undermine its transition to democracy and, as a result, the long-term sustainability of the Tunisian state. While the fate of Tunisia's democratic transition is still uncertain, there is no doubt that, in the long term, it will depend on whether or not, and to what extent, the country will be able to marginalise the old power structure.

In the worst case scenario, if the old power system was to remain largely intact or continue to permeate the state apparatus and the economy, a scenario of authoritarian involution, taking the form of a limited, unfinished or hybrid political transformation, eventually behind the façade of democracy, could materialise. In the short term, the way in which the early phase of transition is managed is crucial in determining the political future of Tunisia. In the early phase of transition, a number of factors could work in favour of the old system of power, thus undermining or slowing down Tunisia's future transition to democracy: a hesitant and still unaccountable interim government, which may not have the will to break away from the old regime because it continues to be linked to it in subtle and inextricable ways; the weakness and disorganisation of independent and new political and civil society groups; and the dramatic socio-economic situation, particularly in the interior regions.

If the interim government was to remain ambiguous in breaking away from the previous regime, particularly as far as the reform of the security and justice systems is concerned, the supporters of the old power system will continue to be strategically placed to influence the direction of

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<sup>87</sup> See, for example, the interview with Hassine Dimassi, an economics professor at Sousse University and an advisor to the UGTT ("Tunisian revolution yet to solve inequality", *al Jazeera*, 11/04/2011 (<http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/03/2011331172249350413.html>)).

<sup>88</sup> "Naissance du second syndicat de l'histoire de la Tunisie", *Jeune Afrique*, 1/02/2011 (<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAWEB20110201185813/tunisie-tunis-zine-el-abidine-ben-ali-independancenaissance-du-second-syndicat-de-l-histoire-de-la-tunisie.html>).

<sup>89</sup> For example, the interim government seized a 51% stake of Orange Tunisia, one of the three phone operators in the country, owned by entrepreneur Marwan Mabrouk, the son-in-law of former president Ben Ali, as well as a 25% stake of Tunisiana belonging to Sakhr el-Materi ("Télécom: la Tunisie nationalise", *Jeune Afrique*, 18/04/2011 (<http://www.jeuneafrique.com>)).

political events, including the election of the Constituent Assembly. For example, should the interim government not address effectively the dismantlement of the old security apparatus, there is the risk that insecurity and intimidation towards political activists will re-emerge, particularly at the time of electoral competitions. Rising insecurity and chaos may destabilise the country, create an unfavourable context for the next elections, and raise the risk of internal tensions. Also keeping intact the old justice system could compromise the fairness and the legitimacy of next elections. In the long term, the lack of profound reforms in the security and justice sectors could generate a crisis of legitimacy of these institutions.

If political parties and civil society groups remain weak and fragmented, this could be exploited by supporters of the old power system in future elections. The reform of the constitution will largely determine the direction and the shape of political transition, while the election of the Constituent Assembly in mid-July will be crucial in deciding who will rewrite the constitution. If the elected Constituent Assembly fails to include a large spectrum of political and social forces and to propose a deep and widely approved constitutional reform, the new constitution and the institutions that will emerge in the following months will enjoy little or no legitimacy. Similarly, if only a few political forces, namely the former opposition parties and those supporting the old system of power, are able to organise for the next legislative elections, the new parliament will be unaccountable to the majority of Tunisians and risk being dominated by people tied to the old system. The failure to integrate the young, under their multiple voices, in all phases of political transition, from rewriting the constitution to entering parliament, may seriously de-legitimise future institutions and raise discontent. Yet, should a large spectrum of political forces enter the Constituent Assembly, irreconcilable divisions could emerge, thus paralysing decision-making and slowing down Tunisia's political transition.

In the absence of effective policies that ease the crisis and respond to Tunisia's urgent socio-economic problems, youth unemployment and regional disparities will increase, raising social discontent and instability. If Tunisia's political economy constraints are not addressed with specific measures, crony capitalism and widespread corruption will continue to sustain the old system of power and hamper the emergence of a vital, independent and dynamic business sector, which could help to respond to unemployment problems.

Should the above-mentioned factors materialise, the most plausible scenario is that of an authoritarian involution, eventually leading to increasing instability, and rising social and political tensions. A more open confrontation between the state and trade unions as well as a radicalisation of political Islam may happen. As long as people's expectations, particularly among the young, are frustrated, support for violence and radicalism may expand rapidly. To the extent that labour market challenges remain unaddressed, labour protests organised by the UGTT or other trade unions could mount. Growing instability and social tensions could also weaken support for democratic transition among the majority of population, thus reinforcing conservative forces. Yet, attempts at destabilising the country through support provided to undemocratic forces inside Tunisia could emanate from neighbouring countries that are interested to abort the Tunisian revolution (De Vasconcelos, 2011). In this regard, the fate of Tunisia's political transition is tightly tied to what will happen in other Arab countries. Finally, persistent instability, political vacuum and rising social tensions could open the stage for the intervention of the army, which enjoys great popularity but whose political intentions are not yet clear.

To end on a more positive note, there are also a number of favourable conditions that bode well for a scenario of successful political transition in Tunisia towards a new steady state of sustainable development: a dynamic and vigilant civil society, which, albeit still fragmented and disorganised, may be a valuable asset, necessary to counterbalance and supervise the action of the interim and future authorities; a relatively homogenous society, both ethnically and



religiously; and a well-educated and mature middle class that took active part in the protests leading to Ben Ali's overthrow. The moderate nature of the Islamist movement *al-Nahda* could also facilitate a democratic outcome of Tunisia's transition.<sup>90</sup> As long as civil society groups, from human rights to political activists, remain vibrant and aware of the risks posed by the old system, interim and future authorities may be under pressure to pursue deep and sustainable political and institutional change.

The EU has a crucial role to play in affecting the future direction of Tunisia's political transition. In order to ensure Tunisia's successful transition to democracy, the EU is called to play a proactive role, both politically and economically. Alongside reconsidering the amount of financial assistance to be allocated to Tunisia's democratic transition (Cassarino & Tocci, 2011), the EU's support to political reform and economic reform should go hand in hand because, as noted above, the future of Tunisia's democratic transition depends on addressing both its political and socio-economic challenges. Moreover, the EU should adapt rapidly the existing policy instruments, including those under the Neighbourhood Policy, as to respond to the specific needs of Tunisia's democratic transition (Cassarino & Tocci, 2011; De Vasconcelos, 2011). As Cassarino & Tocci (2011) propose, one way to avert the risk of an authoritarian involution in Tunisia is that the EU goes back to reconsider the use of conditionality. Furthermore, the EU could provide relevant expertise in sustaining Tunisia's efforts to reform its security and judicial systems as well as in providing assistance to organise and monitor the next elections. In addition, the establishment of adequate mechanisms to monitor who benefits from EU financial assistance may also help to ensure that EU resources are not channelled to crony businessmen tied to the previous regime (Cassarino & Tocci, 2011). The EU should also engage with all political and social actors in the country, from *al-Nahda* to new emerging forces such as youth movements, the UGTT and so on, while at the same time refraining from influencing which forces should participate in the democratic process and which should not (De Vasconcelos, 2011; Cassarino & Tocci, 2011). Yet, because civil society is heterogeneous, the EU needs to identify clearly which actors are in favour of a genuine transition and which are not. Finally, the EU should prioritise support for economic policies that explicitly target job creation for young, particularly educated, and benefit disadvantaged regions.

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<sup>90</sup> Such favourable conditions were highlighted by a Tunisian politician at a conference held in Rome in February 2011.

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## About MEDPRO

MEDPRO – Mediterranean Prospects – is a consortium of 17 highly reputed institutions from throughout the Mediterranean funded under the EU's 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Program and coordinated by the Centre for European Policy Studies based in Brussels. At its core, MEDPRO explores the key challenges facing the countries in the Southern Mediterranean region in the coming decades. Towards this end, MEDPRO will undertake a prospective analysis, building on scenarios for regional integration and cooperation with the EU up to 2030 and on various impact assessments. A multi-disciplinary approach is taken to the research, which is organised into seven fields of study: geopolitics and governance; demography, health and ageing; management of environment and natural resources; energy and climate change mitigation; economic integration, trade, investment and sectoral analyses; financial services and capital markets; human capital, social protection, inequality and migration. By carrying out this work, MEDPRO aims to deliver a sound scientific underpinning for future policy decisions at both domestic and EU levels.

### MEDPRO in a nutshell

<b>Title</b>	MEDPRO – Prospective Analysis for the Mediterranean Region
<b>Description</b>	MEDPRO explores the challenges facing the countries in the South Mediterranean region in the coming decades. The project will undertake a comprehensive foresight analysis to provide a sound scientific underpinning for future policy decisions at both domestic and EU levels.
<b>Mediterranean countries covered</b>	Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey
<b>Coordinator</b>	Dr. Rym Ayadi, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), <a href="mailto:rym.ayadi@ceps.eu">rym.ayadi@ceps.eu</a>
<b>Consortium</b>	Centre for European Policy Studies, <b>CEPS</b> , Belgium; Center for Social and Economic Research, <b>CASE</b> , Poland; Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs, <b>CCEIA</b> , Cyprus; Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei, <b>FEEM</b> , Italy ; Forum Euro-Méditerranéen des Instituts de Sciences Economiques, <b>FEMISE</b> , France ; Faculty of Economics and Political Sciences, <b>FEPS</b> , Egypt; Istituto Affari Internazionali, <b>IAI</b> , Italy; Institute of Communication and Computer Systems, <b>ICCS/NTUA</b> , Greece; Institut Europeu de la Mediterrania, <b>IEMed</b> , Spain; Institut Marocain des Relations Internationales, <b>IMRI</b> , Morocco; Istituto di Studi per l'Integrazione dei Sistemi, <b>ISIS</b> , Italy; Institut Tunisien de la Compétitivité et des Etudes Quantitatives, <b>ITCEQ</b> , Tunisia; Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Bari, <b>MAIB</b> , Italy; Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute, <b>MAS</b> , Palestine; Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute, <b>NIDI</b> , Netherlands; Universidad Politecnica de Madrid, <b>UPM</b> , Spain; Centre for European Economic Research, <b>ZEW</b> , Germany
<b>Budget and Funding</b>	Total budget: 3, 088, 573. 20€. EC-DG RESEARCH contribution : €2,647,330
<b>Duration</b>	1 April 2010 – 31 March 2013 (36 months)
<b>EC Scientific Officer</b>	Dr. Domenico Rossetti Di Valdalbero, DG RESEARCH
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.medpro-foresight.eu">www.medpro-foresight.eu</a>
<b>Contact e-mail</b>	<a href="mailto:medpro@ceps.eu">medpro@ceps.eu</a>