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# THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN POST- REVOLUTION TUNISIA: CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL CONSOLIDATION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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## abstract

THE EVOLUTIONARY PROCESSES OF THE SO-CALLED 'ARAB SPRING' AND ITS ASSOCIATED POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS HAVE BEEN AND STILL REMAIN HIGHLY UNPREDICTABLE AND ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO SYSTEMATICALLY ACCOUNT FOR. THIS PAPER EXPLORES THE CONDITIONS THAT ALLOWED TUNISIA, THE BIRTH PLACE OF THE 'ARAB SPRING', TO ACHIEVE SUCCESSFUL DEMOCRATISING OUTCOMES IN COMPARISON TO ITS NEIGHBOURS ACROSS THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (MENA) REGION. THE PAPER WILL ALSO OFFER SOME ANALYSIS OF FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS BASED ON CURRENT CONTEXT AND PROJECTED OUTLOOK. THIS PAPER ARGUES THAT ONE OF THE KEY INGREDIENTS THAT ALLOWED A RELATIVELY PEACEFUL 'POLITICAL TRANSITION' IN TUNISIA IS THE CONSTRUCTIVE APPROACH TO CONSENSUS POLITICS ADOPTED BY THE KEY POLITICAL ACTORS INCLUDING THE ISLAMIST PARTY ENNAHDA. CONSENSUS POLITICS CREATED WHAT CAN BE TERMED AN 'AUTHENTIC TUNISIAN

APPROACH, A COMBINATION OF POLITICAL PRAGMATISM, ACCEPTANCE OF POWER-SHARING AND A PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL POSITIONING IN KEY NATIONAL DEBATES.

TUNISIA, POLITICAL ISLAM, DEMOCRATISATION, 'POST-ARAB SPRING', ISLAMIST-SECULARIST COMPROMISE.

keyword

## INTRODUCTION

Tunisia was the birthplace of the 'Arab Spring' and therefore became critically important as a case study of democratisation; not only for other Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries affected by the uprisings, but also as a testing ground to the assumption that Arab and Muslim societies are not able to democratise because of an inherent incompatibility between Islam and democratic progress.<sup>1</sup> This latter assumption is important given Huntington's<sup>2</sup> influential argument that while most previously undemocratic regions of the world (particularly, but not exclusively, in Latin America and Eastern Europe) had experienced a 'third wave of democratization' in the late twentieth century, the Arab world seemed resistant to political reform, an anomaly that became known as the 'Arab exceptionalism'.<sup>3</sup> However, this assumption of a democratic deficit<sup>4</sup> was fundamentally challenged early in 2011 by the repercussions of a young Tunisian man's self-immolation in the central Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid. His death sparked violent protests which quickly led to mass mobilizations and authoritarian breakdowns across the region.<sup>5</sup>

Theorists of political system change, especially those working on 'transition' models were keen to understand the key causal factors behind the initial sudden collapse of authoritarian regimes which appeared to have been stable for decades<sup>6</sup> and the extent to which these factors can engender or hinder the development of democratic governance and the rule of law in the post-revolution phase. With the exception of Tunisia, where a successful 'political transition' has thus far been achieved, democratic efforts in MENA countries have been faltering to differing degrees. The optimism that characterised the initial phase of the uprisings,<sup>7</sup> quickly gave way to deep societal divisions along religious, tribal, ethnic and

1 Cevik 2011.

2 Huntington 1991.

3 Brynen et al. 2012.

4 Mansouri 2016.

5 Wafa 2013.

6 Beck, Hüser 2012: 12.

7 Moaddel 2013.

sectarian lines leading to outbursts of mass violence which compromised the delicate ‘transition’ processes.<sup>8</sup> This fragmentation may be explained by the fact initial unity did ‘not appear to have originated from a shared understanding of the universal principle of democratic politics in order to transcend group differences.’<sup>9</sup>

However, and from a methodological point of view, the ‘Arab Spring’ should not be analysed as a homogeneous revolutionary process given the heterogeneity of affected states and, therefore, predictions remain rather difficult to articulate with any degree of conceptual clarity or precision.<sup>10</sup> Whilst many agree that currently the ‘prospects for a more democratic Middle East seem worse than ever,’<sup>11</sup> some commentators have suggested that the region was in the throes of an ‘Arab/Islamist/Economic Winter.’<sup>12</sup> Perhaps, these events should not be considered “springs or winter (...) but a historical process that most Western democracies have gone through – most of them took a long time – and we’re still in the early stages of it.”<sup>13</sup> This paper adopts the latter approach in its analysis of the Tunisian case study. Despite facing security and economic challenges, this article shares the view of many scholars and observers<sup>14</sup> that Tunisia has laid the constitutional foundations necessary to build a functional political system based on democracy and the rule of law. While analysing pre- and post-revolutionary political achievements, this paper will examine the unique attributes of the Tunisian case study, paying particular attention to the relationship between Islamist and secularist parties.

Since its independence from France in 1956, Tunisia went through a process of state-led secular social reform to become at once one of the most socially-progressive and politically-authoritarian countries in the Arab world.<sup>15</sup> Until the 2011 revolution, in fact, political and economic life in Tunisia has been dominated by two long-standing autocratic rulers; Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. During this period, Tunisia’s social modernisation was characterized by a ‘continued repression towards Islam in the political – as well as the public – sectors’ together with human rights abuses.<sup>16</sup> It is in 1989, with Ben Ali’s rise to presidency, that we find the backbone of Ennahda’s party. At that time thousands of imprisoned ‘The Movement of Islamic Tendency’ activists were released. The party renamed itself as Ennahda (Arabic for ‘renaissance’) and toned

down its reference to Islam with the hope of gaining formal recognition by Ben Ali’s government. Yet, relations between Islamists and the ruling regime continued to regress.<sup>17</sup> It was only following the 2011 uprising, that more than 100 political parties (most prominently the Islamist Ennahda movement) were legalized, resulting in the emergence of a civic and political pluralism unprecedented in recent Tunisian history.



TUNISIA HAS LAID THE CONSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS NECESSARY TO BUILD A FUNCTIONAL POLITICAL SYSTEM BASED ON DEMOCRACY AND THE RULE OF LAW

Widespread popular enthusiasm enabled Tunisia to quickly establish “an interim government tasked with organising elections to form a national constituent assembly that would draft a new constitution.”<sup>18</sup> But this task has been repeatedly delayed due to a lack of agreement over certain aspects of the new constitution’s content. Since the early stages of the uprising, a gulf of mistrust had characterized the relationship between Islamist and secularist political factions, with each side seeking “to manipulate the rules of politics to its advantage.”<sup>19</sup> The level of mutual suspicions was particularly high in 2013 especially following a number of violent attacks perpetrated by the Salafist extremist group Ansar al-Shari’a (Supporters of Islamic Law), an illegal terrorist organization. A year earlier, a violent attack on the US embassy had pushed the Ennahda-led government to take a first clear stance against jihadi Salafists. Until then, in fact, Ennahda had supported the inclusion of Salafist parties into the political landscape believing that the new Tunisia should be inclusive of all ideologies, including conservative religious ones. But growing popular opposition and ensuing political impasses, pushed Ennahda to step down peacefully in favour of a caretaker technocrat government that would oversee the presidential and parliamentary elections.<sup>20</sup> These elections were eventually held late in 2014 with newly formed secular centrist Nidaa Tunis party winning both.

8 Behr, Siitonen 2013.

9 Moaddel 2013: 11.

10 Boose 2012.

11 Williamson, Abadeer 2014: para. 1.

12 Byman 2011; Totten 2012.

13 R. Khouri as quoted in: Schwartz 2014: para. 6.

14 Arieff, Humud 2015; Boose 2012; Ostry 2014.

15 Black 2010.

16 Loudon 2015: 8.

17 Loudon 2015.

18 Watanabe 2013: 1.

19 Arieff, Humud 2015: 1.

20 Loudon 2015.

Since March 2015, three new incidents of Islamist extremism (the Bardo and Sousse attacks<sup>21</sup> first followed by the bus explosion killing presidential guards),<sup>22</sup> led President Essebsi to declare a 'state of emergency' throughout the country. Despite these tragic events and serious economic discontent, neither the transitional process towards democracy, nor the relationship between Islamist and secularist parties in the governing coalition were affected. Indeed, as of August 2016 the incoming national unity government will most likely exhibit similar political arrangements as the initial post 2015 elections governing coalition. This paper argues a crucial reason for a relatively successful 'political transition' has been the role played by the Islamist Party, Ennahda, which mastered the art of 'consensus politics' across political and ideological divides. This approach, which ultimately led to a local adaptation of 'democratic transition,' involved three main features: (1) a pragmatic approach to everyday deliberative politics; (2) a strategic orientation towards power-sharing arrangements involving secular parties; and (3) an acceptance of progressive social agendas in key national debates in particular those relating to women's rights. The fact that recently Ennahda declared that it will separate the political from the religious (i.e. preaching) signals a reinforcement of the 'Tunisification' process of Ennahda as it continues to distance itself from the regional Muslim Brotherhood movement.<sup>23</sup>

The next section will situate the Tunisian political process within broader debates on 'democratic transition' highlighting the contextual specificities that complicate the task of making accurate 'predictions' regarding democratic 'consolidation.'

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### THE CHALLENGE OF PREDICTING DEMOCRATIC 'CONSOLIDATION' IN THE MENA REGION

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Theories of 'transition' elaborated in the 1970s postulated 'the possibility of linear transitions from authoritarianism to liberal democracy.'<sup>24</sup> This approach was applied to the 'transition' experience of many Eastern European countries, where protests brought communism down leading towards free market and political pluralism.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, the 'Arab

21 Islamic State (IS) was said to be behind both deadly attacks targeting mainly foreign tourists with tourism representing Tunisia's largest source of foreign currency. It is worth noting that Tunisia has contributed the largest number of foreign fighters to IS in Syria and Iraq. In this context, conflict-racked Libya, together with the return of foreign fighters that have joined radical groups fighting in Iraq and Syria, have preoccupied Tunisian politics despite democratic advances (El-Ghobashy, Addala 2015).

22 Freeman, Squires 2015; Stephen 2015.

23 Mellor, Rinnawi 2016.

24 Guazzone, Pioppi 2009: 2.

25 Rahmetov 2012: 2.

Spring' has often been likened to the process of democratization in post-Communist, Eastern European regimes.<sup>26</sup> Although as Vallianatos<sup>27</sup> argues 'the former Communist bloc carries a significant experience of political transformation which could be of relevance to the Arab states,' the exact democratic process might not be replicable elsewhere. Beck & Hüser<sup>28</sup> provide three possible explanations (political, historical and economic), which would impede a comparison between the 1989 and 2011 waves of revolutions.

Firstly, unlike the Eastern European countries, Arab countries have lower 'external' incentives for democratization. For example, Arab countries do not have the same type of support and guidance provided by the EU.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, there is no regional equivalent to the EU as local efforts to create any kind of 'pan-Arab' or even 'pan-Maghreb' transnational unity have repeatedly failed over the last three decades.<sup>30</sup> The Arab League has been and remains too divided and weak to play such a constructive role. Interestingly, the most successful 'transitions,' particularly among the Eastern European countries, were greatly facilitated by assistance from the EU.<sup>31</sup>

The second critical factor to consider can be found in the differing historical trajectories of Eastern European countries and the Arab world:

It should be noted that the region's nationalist regimes (with some socialist paint), established in the 1950s, were an indigenous reaction to Western imperialism and colonialism, while socialism in Eastern Europe was externally imposed by the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Eastern European states were able to return to their economic and political heritage, which they shared with Western Europe, but the Arab world faces the challenge of having to redefine itself politically and economically.<sup>32</sup>

And thirdly, there are economic factors which can affect the development

26 Beck, Hüser 2012; Ishay 2013.

27 Vallianatos 2013: 7.

28 Beck, Hüser 2012.

29 However, there have been numerous attempts by the EU to encourage good governance in some MENA countries. This is the case for Morocco - which has an 'advanced status' in European Neighbourhood Policy's Southern Dimension and Tunisia with 'privileged partnership' within the same policy. Both countries are also in different phases of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement - the agreement which is a leading tool for encouraging reforms, including democratic ones (Rey 2016).

30 Sawani 2012.

31 Ishay 2013.

32 Beck, Hüser 2012: 19-20.



‘PAN-ARAB’ OR EVEN ‘PAN-MAGHREB’  
TRANSNATIONAL UNITY HAVE REPEATEDLY  
FAILED OVER THE LAST THREE DECADES

and consolidation of democratic institutions. At the end of the Cold War, economic actors attracted by the prospect of substantial profits, invested in Eastern European countries, which were concurrently encouraged to advance certain reform processes, thus giving investors confidence. In comparison the political and social instability in post-revolution ‘Arab Spring’ countries deterred investors.

As these three factors demonstrate, ‘democratic transition’ is not an inevitable outcome. Indeed and in addition to the political, historical and economic challenges ‘if the post-revolutionary political platform is not compatible in substance with human rights norms’ this creates yet another structural hurdle.<sup>33</sup> Although a number of attitudinal studies pertaining to democracy in Arab and non-Arab Muslim states show democracy is gaining support,<sup>34</sup> the post-revolutionary phase in ‘Arab Spring’ countries has also been characterized by the emergence of anti-revolutionary and anti-democratic forces, mainly conservative and radical Islamist groups, which has the potential to jeopardize the prospects for ‘democratic consolidation.’<sup>35</sup>

Recent polls (May 2016) in relation to Tunisian voters’ attitudes towards political parties reveal some worrying trends. Indeed, 72% of Tunisians have a negative perception of political parties; 67% state that political parties are not that close to them in terms of understanding their needs; and only 35% think that political parties make decisions in the best interest of citizens.<sup>36</sup> Whilst democracy is becoming more ubiquitous in the minds of Arab people in general,<sup>37</sup> no longer the preserve of intellectuals and politicians, the Arab world as a whole is still “charting a revolutionary path through an era of unfamiliar democratization, and there is no way to predict the outcome until it is over.”<sup>38</sup> A ‘Western-style democracy’ cannot simply be super-imposed on the Middle East as there are specific nuances

33 Ishay 2013: 7.

34 Ghosh 2013; Moaddel 2013; Sawani 2014.

35 Mansouri 2016.

36 Sigma Conseil 2016.

37 According to the 2015 Arab Opinion Index (AOI) “79% of Arabs believe that democracy is the most appropriate system of government for their home countries.” This study was based on 18,311 face-to-face interviews conducted in 12 different Arab countries including Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania, Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (Arab Center Washington DC 2016).

38 Boose 2012: 310.

of state-society relations that “need to be taken into consideration, because various strings of democratic ideas, values and practices are embedded in such relations.”<sup>39</sup>

An “Arabian version of democracy,” Ghosh argues, contains “ideas on justice, authority, and political obligation – the way authority [has] been able to command loyalty from the subject-population since ancient times.”<sup>40</sup> It is thus important to acknowledge that due to contextual specificities as well as other cultural and historical differences, Western democratic systems cannot always be transposed onto other societies, where democratic governance can at times take a different form. Nor is this always desirable. In this context, the specific role of religious ideologies in politics cannot be curtailed or avoided altogether, as many Western countries and their Middle Eastern allies have openly tried to do.<sup>41</sup> Yet, the role of religion in politics poses conceptual challenges for those who seek to analyse and understand the nature of ‘democratic transition’ in non-Western societies.

#### FROM ‘INDEPENDENCE’ AND NATION-BUILDING TO ‘AUTHORITARIAN’ RULE

The 2010 uprising marked an epochal shift in Tunisian history, as the North African state was characterized by a lack of deep-rooted procedural and institutional ‘democratic culture.’<sup>42</sup> This section provides an historical overview of the development of an outright authoritarian agenda since liberation from French colonial rule. It illustrates the main characteristics of Bourguiba’s and Ben Ali’s regimes: a centrally controlled economic and political system; imprisonment of human rights activists; relegation of religious idioms to a secondary status. As a consequence, the initial euphoria regarding the prospects for political reform were also accompanied by fears that the process of developing resilient democratic institutions would fail in the longer term.

In the aftermath of Tunisia’s independence, a set of laws (also known as Code of Personal Status or CPS) were introduced allowing “women to avoid polygamy, repudiation, child marriages (with a minimum marriage age and consent of both spouses)” and permitting them to initiate divorce proceedings.<sup>43</sup> A year later women gained suffrage, and in 1959 were able to run for public office. Women’s equality was also enshrined in the Tunisian Constitution and a number of supplementary legal texts. The improvement

39 Ghosh 2013: 17-18.

40 Ghosh 2013: 18.

41 Loudon 2015.

42 Dennison et al. 2011.

43 Retta 2013: 36.

of women's legal status and social conditions, and a significant investment in national education, triggered a demographic transformation which changed the post-independence social landscape. As a result, "today women students constitute over half the university student body and women actively participate throughout society and politics."<sup>44</sup> It is the social emancipation of Tunisian women which ensured their prominent role during the uprising<sup>45</sup> and cementing the ensuing post-revolution prospects for developing and sustaining democracy in comparison to other MENA countries.<sup>46</sup>

However, despite this social and educational reform, pre-revolution Tunisia remained lacking in political freedoms and human rights protections. Indeed, political opposition remained weak in Tunisia as the centralised government maintained near complete control over the political landscape<sup>47</sup> and the institutions that sustained it. Civil society was forced to adhere to the state's priorities in the name of fighting colonialist legacies, achieving national sovereignty, establishing a modern national state and advancing broader social and economic reforms.<sup>48</sup> During his presidency Bourguiba instituted what I. W. Zartman<sup>49</sup> termed 'position politics/patronage' in which "important posts [were given] to powerful individuals who could use their positions to service their own clientele." In this context, even when forced underground, civil society provided few openings for external manipulation, creating an indirect connection with the elite in power and some room for political manoeuvre. The main aim of Bourguiba's politics was the maintenance of social cohesiveness and unity within an authoritarian framework, with religious idioms relegated to a secondary status.<sup>50</sup>

Ben Ali replaced Bourguiba in 1987 in a bloodless coup d'état and his presidency was an example of what R. W. Bulliet<sup>51</sup> terms 'Neo-Mamluk rule,' referring "to personalist dictatorships that were built by autocrats originating from the military/security services."<sup>52</sup> Despite the introduction of a number of what appeared to be at the time as progressive measures,

44 Deane 2013: 14.

45 Retta 2013.

46 Boose 2012.

47 Naciri 2009: 16.

48 Chomiak, Entelis 2013.

49 As quoted in: Alexander 2013: 34.

50 Sadiki 2002.

51 As quoted in: Rahmetov 2012: 9.

52 A more recent study conducted that provides transition information for the 280 autocratic regimes (in 110 countries with more than a million population) in existence from 1946 to 2010, Tunisia was coded as 'dominant-party' rather than 'personalist' (Geddes et al. 2014). This category is defined as a regime where control over policy, leadership selection, and the security apparatus is in the hands of one party.

political participation, freedom of expression and religious activism remained harshly repressed.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, when Ben Ali succeeded Bourguiba, a "benign form of authoritarian rule" was replaced by a "form of manipulative democracy," with democratic rhetoric and institutions concealing a stronger version of authoritarianism.<sup>54</sup> Compared to his predecessor, Ben Ali was less willing to use 'position politics/patronage;' instead he tried to "break the tie between elite and popular politics that was so vital in the 1970s and 1980s" ensuring that civil society would remain "unavailable as a political weapon."<sup>55</sup> Motivated by a deep fear of a region-wide Islamist threat, which was heightened by the 1992 Algerian civil war,<sup>56</sup> Ben Ali's reign oversaw the imposition of authoritarian mechanisms to regulate civil society and curb its capacity for action. After the first two promising years, with Ben Ali allowing multi-party elections, granting amnesty to hundreds of political prisoners and adopting a liberal press code among the other things, his regime became a 'police state' for the next two decades repressing political opponents and any semblance of active civil society.<sup>57</sup> And no group felt this repression more severely than Islamist activists.

In fact, the Islamist political party, Ennahda, became the second most important force in Tunisian politics, leading the Ben Ali regime to increase state coercive forces and to 'emasculate' the Islamist movement.<sup>58</sup> Despite such repressive measures, civil society as a whole was able to survive thanks in particular to a well-established labour union tradition. While pushing the government to improve the conditions of workers in the country, the trade union movement contributed to creating an environment for social dialogue. Founded in 1924, the first labour union in the Arab world,<sup>59</sup> it played a strong role not only before, but also during the independence struggle, as well as in the post-independence nation-building process.<sup>60</sup> Subsequently, the number of civil society organizations increased from nearly 2,000 in 1988 to over 9,000 in 2009<sup>61</sup> and to a record 18,000 in 2016.<sup>62</sup> Despite their unorganized nature, the popular pressure exerted by these associations was fundamental in toppling the Ben Ali regime and later in ensuring a successful 'transitional phase.'<sup>63</sup> The Islamists, as part of

53 Arieff, Humud 2015.

54 Chomiak, Entelis 2013: 76.

55 Alexander 2013: 38.

56 Schulhofer-Wohl 2007.

57 King 2014.

58 King 2014.

59 International Labour Organization 2014.

60 Mansouri 2016.

61 C. M. Henry 2011 as quoted in: Mansouri 2016.

62 Barhoumi 2016.

63 Deane 2013.

a broader socio-political landscape, were influenced and pushed towards 'consensus politics' by an active and broadly secular civil society and, consequently played a constructive role in the post-revolution transitional democratic stage.

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### DEMOCRATIC 'TRANSITION' AND THE CHALLENGES OF POST-REVOLUTION 'CONSOLIDATION'

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After a period of political uncertainty, the Tunisian 'transition' has been recently characterised as an "exceptional success story" by Freedom House.<sup>64</sup> This is notable in comparison to other Arab countries affected by the 'Arab Spring.' Indeed, across the region the score card is not all that positive: there is 'an army-backed authoritarian regime in Egypt, chaos and a disintegrating social and political fabric in Libya, an endless civil war in Syria, and political instability in Yemen.'<sup>65</sup> The success achieved in what is now being dubbed the 'Tunisian Spring' looks even more significant when democracy at the international level faced numerous challenges over the last few decades due to a decline of global political rights and civil liberties.<sup>66</sup> Five years ago, just prior to the uprising, Tunisia was rated as a 'Not Free' country and categorised as one of the most repressive regimes in the world.<sup>67</sup> While the rest of the MENA region continues to be plagued by instability, violence and civil wars, 2015 will be regarded as an historical year for the North African state, becoming the first Arab country to achieve a 'Free' country status on the Freedom House scale.<sup>68</sup>

The presence of local NGOs, as well as international observers, overseeing the electoral processes contributed to the success and legitimacy of the elections. Annemie Neyts-Utterbroeck, of the observer mission of the EU, described the voting in Tunisia as "more than satisfactory."<sup>69</sup> The parliamentary elections were touted as the end of the 'transitional' period, signalling an important step towards the normalization of the new political system.<sup>70</sup> Yet, as Reidy<sup>71</sup> has recently argued; "Tunisia's shining example is still a work in progress. Scratching at the surface of the 'democratic transition' reveals that the old system inherited from the era of dictatorship is still largely intact." Nidaa Tounes brings together a wide variety of ideological currents,

64 Freedom House 2015b.

65 Ben Mcharek 2015: para. 2.

66 Freedom House 2015b.

67 Freedom House 2015b.

68 Freedom House 2015b: 1.

69 The Tunis Times 2014: para. 4.

70 Yaşar 2014.

71 Reidy 2015.

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THE 'TUNISIAN SPRING' LOOKS EVEN MORE SIGNIFICANT WHEN DEMOCRACY AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL FACED NUMEROUS CHALLENGES OVER THE LAST FEW DECADES

from human rights advocates to members of the labour union, as well as leftists and some independents. Among the Party are also former members of Ben Ali's Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party who have not been implicated in corruption, but remain some of "the numerically and economically most powerful members of Nidaa Tounes."<sup>72</sup> The presence of those with knowledge and experience of how to run a government might explain at least partially Tunisia's success story.

In any case, as Reidy suggests, Tunisia's 'transition' is still an ongoing process whose long-term sustainability will depend on the newly-elected government's ability to address a number of urgent issues (corruption, economic stagnation and terrorism), which have the capacity to compromise internal stability and revive political polarization.<sup>73</sup> According to the 2015 annual report on political rights and civil liberties issued by Freedom House,<sup>74</sup> corruption in Tunisia has been increasing in the last three years and 'a strong legal framework and systematic practices aimed at curbing corruption have yet to take shape.' Some politicians and members of the security forces are perceived to be among the most corrupt groups. The inconsistent application of the rule of law and ongoing regulatory inefficiency have weakened Tunisia's fragile economic framework, which remains stagnant with a high level of unemployment (17.5%). According to the '2015 Index of Economic Freedom,'<sup>75</sup> the persistence of a system characterized by privileges and cronyism is at the core of the country's deep-rooted socioeconomic deficiency.

In a poll of 8,045 young people in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen carried out by the Al Jazeera Center for Studies (AJCS)<sup>76</sup> rampant corruption and the deterioration of national economies were the most cited causes of the uprisings across the region, including Tunisia, where the fate of its new government is linked to its success in meeting Tunisians' high expectations for rapid economic and democratic development. What has clearly emerged from the analysis of a number of opinion polls conducted since the uprising is the economic performance of the country can directly affect Tunisians'

72 Wolf 2014: 15.

73 Reidy 2015.

74 Freedom House 2015a: Section C.

75 Heritage Foundation 2015.

76 AJCS 2013.

faith in the democratic system and their degree of political engagement and social connectedness.<sup>77</sup>

More worryingly perhaps, is the significant challenge to ‘democratic consolidation’ that the spread of terrorist threats across North Africa poses. The presence of radical groups in and around Tunisia is growing and benefits from the political instability in neighbouring Libya.<sup>78</sup> The ‘Arab Spring’ itself, as Mullin and Rouabah<sup>79</sup> argue, was not merely a ‘liberal revolution’ but contained within it a conglomerate of radical pushes. Before the recent attack on the Bardo Museum and the Sousse beach resort, extremism and political violence had reached their climax in 2013 with the assassination of two members of the leftist Popular Front coalition. Today, despite the implementation of counter-terrorism strategies, religiously-motivated violence, chiefly committed by jihadi Salafist groups, remains a challenge<sup>80</sup> to the long-term viability of the only functional democracy across the region.

#### ‘CONSENSUS POLITICS’ AS A KEY FOUNDATION FOR ‘DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION’

Given the economic and security challenges, the two dominant political forces of the post-2014 elections (Islamist Ennahda and secular centrist Nidaa) needed to engage in a new type of ‘real politics,’ thus avoiding the ideological polarization which characterized much of Tunisian political history.<sup>81</sup> This strategic partnership was needed in order to overcome a crisis that jeopardised the many political achievements of the revolution. In this context, the lack of a clear majority for any party in parliament after the 2014 elections posed a real risk of fragmentation and volatility in an already fragile arrangement.<sup>82</sup> The presidential elections re-emphasized the existence of ideological divisions, not just between Islamists and the more secular Nidaa Tounes or the leftist Popular Front groups, but also between the wealthier capital and coastal constituencies and the less developed interior towns.<sup>83</sup> The outcome of these elections, therefore, produced a new Tunisia characterized by a bipolar constellation that attracted almost 70% of the popular vote in the parliamentary elections: the centrist secular Nidaa Tounes on the one hand, and the moderate Islamist Ennahda on the other, as well as a number of smaller parties fighting to win the hearts and

77 International Republican Institute 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; Pew Research Center 2014; Sigma Conseil 2013 as quoted in: Yaros 2013; Sigma Conseil 2014, 2016.

78 Bohlander 2013.

79 Mullin, Rouabah 2014.

80 Wolf 2014: 17.

81 Hamid 2014.

82 Redissi, Ben Amar 2015: 2.

83 The New York Times 2014.

minds of Tunisian voters.

And yet despite a deep ideological divide, as well as the difficult economic and security situation, the new Tunisian political elite have overall “displayed unparalleled political maturity, with the challenge of continuing the process of political compromise and settlement.”<sup>84</sup> In a crucial stage of the ‘democratic consolidation,’ the constant dialogue between leaders of opposing parties is paving the way of stability for many years to come. For instance, back in 2013 and during a time of real crisis following the political assassinations of prominent opposition figures, and as Wolf put it, “the Islamist-led government did not cling to power by all means,”<sup>85</sup> a decision that proved critical in the Tunisian ‘democratic consolidation’ phase. Similarly, outgoing president Marzouki’s decision not to challenge the results of the country’s presidential election is a further sign of détente and political acumen.<sup>86</sup> This ‘pragmatism and moderation’ in the case of Tunisia can nurture hope in a wretched region.<sup>87</sup>

The country is now governed (and will continue to be) through a broad political coalition and in accordance with international standards. Surely, as Mastic observed, Ennahda’s strategic choice of ‘consensus politics’ in Tunisia does not appear congruous with other events in North Africa.<sup>88</sup> In Egypt, for instance, a groundswell of protest ultimately led to President Muhammad Morsi’s ousting and “the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist candidates fared poorly in Libya’s House of Representatives elections.”<sup>89</sup> The faltering Egyptian scenario, in particular, emphasizes the extent of the successful political trajectory of Tunisia. As Solomon put it:

Unlike former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahda’s leader, Rached Ghannouchi, an Islamist scholar who spent decades in exile in Britain, acted pragmatically when faced with overwhelming opposition. Instead of trying to force his party’s Islamist vision on much of the population that is less religious, Ghannouchi did not overstay his welcome, deciding to continue playing the political game, instead of seizing power in ways reminiscent of Morsi.<sup>90</sup>

In this context, the successful national dialogue in Tunisia, which led to

84 Haffiz 2015: 7.

85 Wolf 2014: 3.

86 Anadolu Agency 2014.

87 Mullin, Rouabah 2014.

88 Mastic 2014.

89 Mastic 2014: para. 1.

90 Solomon 2014: para. 2-3.



an inclusive road map towards political stability, is a reminder that “just as Islamists could not establish a democracy by excluding others, the others cannot do so by excluding Islamists.”<sup>91</sup> The civil society quartet was duly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 2015, a recognition of the critical role played in ensuring peaceful and democratic transformations were achieved in Tunisia.

Ideological divisions are a common aspect of political liberalism as democratic politics is based on “a pluralism of incompatible ideological doctrines that divide otherwise free and equal citizens by multiple, but often overlapping, class, ideological, religious, geographic or other cleavages.”<sup>92</sup> Secularist and Islamists, as the Tunisian example shows, are not inherently incompatible. Indeed, “the two aren’t mutually exclusive and such dichotomy is reductionist and essentialist. [Besides], Islamists are not monolithic and most of them are committed to democratic principles.”<sup>93</sup>

The Tunisian case is a reminder that political processes are more complex in the Arab world than elsewhere, particularly because of deep vertical divisions along sectarian and tribal lines.<sup>94</sup> As Hale suggests, “a ‘trajectory’ toward or away from ideal-type endpoints like democracy or autocracy”<sup>95</sup> cannot be precisely predicted. Political change can be cyclic, oscillating between democracy and dictatorship, rather than purely progressive or regressive.<sup>96</sup> Scholars, such as Carothers, discard the ‘transition paradigm’ tout court, arguing that the indistinct space “between full-fledged democracy and outright dictatorship is actually the most common political condition today of countries in the developing world and the post-communist world.”<sup>97</sup>

The concept of ‘democratic consolidation’ can also be problematic as it refers to a process containing a multiplicity of meanings, context-dependent and perspective-dependent, which can produce a plurality of typologies<sup>98</sup> reflecting different degrees of regime ‘consolidation:’ semi-democracy, formal democracy, electoral democracy, façade democracy or pseudo-democracy to name a few.<sup>99</sup> The risk of using such categories, though, is to describe countries as suspended somewhere on a ‘democratization sequence.’<sup>100</sup> Yet, as Schedler suggests, making predictive inferences, might

91 Khan 2014: 84.

92 J. Rawls 2005 as quoted in: Pappas 2014: 3.

93 Daadaoui 2014: para. 2.

94 Z. Majed as quoted in: McAfee 2011.

95 Hale 2005: 134.

96 Mansouri 2016.

97 Carothers 2002: 18.

98 For example, Schedler 2001: 66-67.

99 G. O’Donnell 1996a, 1996b, as quoted in: Schedler 2001.

100 Carothers 2002.

allow us to assess if a democracy is secure from a possible ‘breakdown.’<sup>101</sup> What emerges from such argument is that ‘democratic consolidation’ implies not just observation, but also prospective reasoning.

The assessment and discussion of the consolidation process may begin by formulating open-ended examinations of the political situation as a whole<sup>102</sup> and by considering if the country has been developing what Morlino calls the ‘qualities’ of a ‘good’ democracy.<sup>103</sup> Democracy as some argue can be defined as “a stable institutional structure that realizes the liberty and equality of citizens through the legitimate and correct functioning of its institutions and mechanisms.”<sup>104</sup> Quality can then be measured in terms of ‘result’ (citizens are satisfied), ‘content’ (citizens enjoy moderate level of liberty and equality) or ‘procedure’ (citizens can check and evaluate if the government operates according to the rule of law). Rothstein corroborates this view by stressing the importance of ‘performance’ or ‘output’ measures (such as the control of corruption or government effectiveness) in explaining political legitimacy.<sup>105</sup>

The prevailing view among scholars is that ‘democratic transitions’ can help to understand the type of democracy that will emerge and whether or not it is likely to ‘consolidate.’<sup>106</sup> For instance, while ‘smooth’ transitions generally associate with lower risks of war and higher levels of democracy during the post-transitional phase, ‘rocky’ (or violent) transitions associate with increases in war and are more likely to revert to authoritarian rule.<sup>107</sup> In the case of Tunisia, the critical factors that prevented political breakdown and post-revolutionary chaos were the proactive role of civil society; the ‘consensus politics’ that produced the new constitution, the successive credible political elections held since the overthrow of the Ben Ali dictatorship, together with the commitment of its major political parties to cooperation and compromise. The combination of these events represents a cornerstone of Tunisia’s ‘democratic transition,’ which equipped the country with the structural foundation for sustainable political reform.

It may still be too early to say if the state will ‘consolidate’ its democratic gains in the long term, given the current challenges on the economic and security fronts.<sup>108</sup> Yet, the very introduction of deliberative democracy and pluralist politics, with opposing forces primarily concerned with transitioning the state towards consolidating a working, stable democracy,

101 Schedler 2001.

102 Carothers 2002.

103 Morlino 2009.

104 Morlino 2009: 4.

105 Rothstein 2014.

106 Stradiotto, Guo 2010.

107 Ward, Gleditsch 1998, as quoted in: Stradiotto, Guo 2010.

108 Mansouri 2015; Cheibub 2014.

signals that ‘democratic transition’ has been achieved in Tunisia.<sup>109</sup> The institutionalization of democratic gains will ensure a stronger state and more robust political institutions.<sup>110</sup> This will be especially the case if the major political partners in the new coalition government are able to manage their own internal fallouts democratically and peacefully.<sup>111</sup> Drawing upon Schedler’s<sup>112</sup> work on ‘democratic consolidation,’ we see this process as connected to the concept’s original concern with democratic survival. By avoiding democratic breakdown (authoritarian regression) and democratic erosion (gradual weakening of democracy), we argue that Tunisia is achieving a relatively successful ‘consolidated democracy’ that many observers expect to last well into the foreseeable future. Such a prognostic for Tunisia, which is based on robust determinants of democracy (chiefly primary schooling), would support positive predictions.

“

THE COUNTRY HAS ACHIEVED NEAR  
UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

Indeed, using a long-time frame (1870–2000 period), Murtin & Wacziarg found strong empirical support for Lipset’s modernization hypothesis, according to which improvements in economic standards would ultimately lead to democratization.<sup>113</sup> By sustaining this theory Murtin & Wacziarg argue that is actually the level of primary schooling, and to a lesser extent income levels, to have a substantial impact on (broadly defined) democracy standards. Support to Lipset’s theory came also from Wucherpfennig & Deutsch. According to them, democracy is not a random process, but rather the results of certain “socio-economic conditions which create and maintain an environment for stable and enduring democracies.”<sup>114</sup> ‘Democratic transition’ is thus not only a procedural matter at the level of constitutions and elections, but also pertains to the delivery of services in particular quality public schooling.

Two recent studies show that Tunisia’s progress is in line with Murtin & Wacziarg’s findings. According to the first study, conducted by Education Policy and Data Center (EPDC),<sup>115</sup> the progress made by Tunisia towards universal primary education – which represents a key UN Sustainable Development Goal – suggests that “the country has achieved near universal primary education.” The second study, a report issued by the World Bank in

109 Stradiotto, Guo 2010.

110 Carbone, Memoli 2015.

111 Mansouri 2015.

112 Schedler 1998.

113 Murtin, Wacziarg 2014:178.

114 Wucherpfennig, Deutsch 2009.

115 EPDC 2014:2.

2015, also confirms that GDP per capita has been constantly growing in the last two decades, despite a slight decline in the last few years in conjunction with socio-political upheaval following the 2011 revolution. Although security and economic challenges persist, Tunisia appears “to be entering a steady recovery from a period of heightened volatility and uncertainty.”<sup>116</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Tunisia was the first ‘Arab Spring’ country to embark on a transformative process away from authoritarian structures and towards democratic governance and accountable institutions. Tunisia’s political vicissitudes are assuming a strategic, even symbolic importance, not only for the Arab world in general, but also for theorists of democratic ‘transition’ and ‘consolidation.’ Yet as we explore the prospects of longer-term consolidation, the twin challenges of economic/unemployment instability, and the threat of radical Jihadist groups will test the capacity of the new democratically-elected governments to deliver tangible progress to internal constituencies and external stakeholders alike. A key condition, therefore, for sustained success is for Tunisia to be supported regionally and internationally in overcoming these challenges as well as in managing internal ideological polarization whilst continuing to operate within a democratic institutional framework.<sup>117</sup> Sustaining Tunisia’s democratic gains, though, will send a significant signal to anti-democratic forces that thrive amid chaos and instability across the region. Post-revolution success in ensuring internal security, economic stability and political legitimacy means “Tunisia has been, and remains, the only credible story”<sup>118</sup> in a region beset by failing states and rising terrorist activities. Tunisia’s success reflects an ‘authentic Tunisian approach’ that has been dubbed ‘the Tunisian exception,’ one that saw pragmatic ‘consensus politics’ trump narrow ideological doctrines in pursuit of genuine political reform. Our conceptualization is thus in line with Heffernan’s work, who defines such consensus not as an agreement or a settlement but as a political framework which “constrains the autonomy of governing elites, encouraging them to conform to an established policy agenda that defines the ‘mainstream’ wherein ‘the possible is the art of politics.’”<sup>119</sup> In this context, the government becomes the instrument which should accomplish what needs to be done, even if this cuts across ideological doctrines. ‘Consensus politics’ is, therefore, best defined as a ‘constrained space’ within which politics is conducted and political actors may still differ but with the common goal

116 World Bank 2015:3.

117 Cheibub 2014.

118 Mansouri 2015: para. 13.

119 Heffernan 2002: 742.

of producing change while ensuring overall stability. A democratic Tunisia that is also stable and prosperous will offer a platform, if not a 'model,' for other MENA countries especially those currently struggling with complex and at times chaotic transitions.

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