After the Arab Spring: Transitions in the Arab World

From Revolution to the Project of Democracy: The Difficulties of Organising the Tunisian Transition

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The Revolutionary Consensus

The Tunisian revolution of January 2011 was primarily a social revolution whose roots went back to the economic and social difficulties that had given rise to significant protests in 2008 in the Gafsa region. Three years later, the same causes gave rise to violent protests in the centre of the country before spreading to the ensemble of regions and becoming a major political crisis. The Tunisian uprising of December 2010 and January 2011 illustrates the mobilisation of all social categories. Beginning in Sidi Bouzid, a small city in the centre of Tunisia, the movement arose after the self-immolation of a young street vendor on 17 December 2010. On the morrow, local union activists joined the uprising. The movement spread to nearby municipalities where protesters attacked police barracks, offices of the party in power, i.e. the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), and Administration buildings. The government then attempted to quell the revolt via tear gas bombs and truncheons, but as of 24 December, the police had the order to shoot real bullets at the protesters.

Cyber-activists active since the late 1990s, passed on information about the self-immolation of the young Mohamed Bouazizi, who was struggling between life and death at the hospital for severe burn victims in Tunis, and about police repression and crack-downs against protesters occurring in different places. Facebook, which has two and a half million users in this country of ten million inhabitants, together with mobile phones, played a significant role in spreading infor-mation and mobilising protesters. Beginning on 26 December 2010, many protests took place before local offices of the national trade union, UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union). The trade union decided to participate in the revolt and organised a rotating strike accompanied by a protest, each regional office carrying out a day of strike. On 12 January it was the city of Sfax that organised a huge protest march with 100,000 participants, and on 14 January, it was Tunis' turn to organise one.

From all walks of life, all age groups and all social strata, the demonstrators were protesting against the regime's repressive practices, corruption and lack of freedom. The primary slogan resounding as of December – "work is an inalienable right, band of crooks!" – was already meant to rally all those suffering from unemployment and who considered the Head of State's entourage a real caste that had seized both economic networks and power.

The gap between the Tunisians' demand and the Presidential supply inflamed the movement. In a last speech delivered on 13 January, the Head of State was far from mentioning his immediate departure. He made promises for 2014, affirmed he had been mistaken on the breadth of the crisis and proposed reforms. A manifest sign of confusion, Ben Ali's promises concerned very different domains ranging from the reduction of staple food prices to internet censure, as well as the promise of real democracy. But this tardy *mea culpa*, which revealed the scope of the Head of State's weakness, had the effect of irritating the Tunisians and uniting them in anger against a president not lacking in imagination to keep himself in power. The pathetic image of a decrepit power with its leader down revealed a reversal of the order of things. Ben Ali seemed quite alone, devoid of support from his traditional allies: the police was overwhelmed, the members of the RCD were invisible and the army refused to fire against a

population with whom it would soon fraternise. On the morrow, on the evening of that famous 14 January when the President was to leave the capital, he gave a sense of having obeyed this population so long crushed under the weight of the authoritarianism of a personal power and a police State that seemed to subdue it.

Yet these masses united by rage and the expression of a radical rejection of the regime had neither father nor religion nor ideology. From 17 December, when Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself, to 14 January, the traditional left-wing or Islamist ideologies were not expressed. The compact masses occupying the streets were undivided. In reality, the novelty of this revolution resides in the connection between iconic Bouazizi, the young street vendor in which everyone recognised themselves, and the imaginary of the internet users. It was this meeting of two public spaces – the real and the virtual – that triggered a civil disobedience movement structured around various slogans and watchwords, the most eloquent certainly being "the people want...." The introduction of the people as a free, autonomous entity addressing the elite reversed the usual discourse, where over the course of half a century, Tunisians saw the elite speak to the people.

Establishing Provisional Institutions

On the morrow of Ben Ali's departure, three types of threats weighed upon the revolutionary process. Certain observers believed at the time that the army, which had power within its reach, would seize it. Others believed that the former beneficiaries of the Ben Ali regime were liable to organise a counter-revolution. Finally, the process could also derail due to lack of institutions and actors capable of effecting the transition. To prevent an institutional void, on 15 January, by virtue of Article 57, the Constitutional Council appointed Fouad Mebazaa, the President of the National Assembly, as interim President of the Republic for a period of 60 days. On 17 January, the first national unity government was formed by Mohamed Ghanouchi, Prime Minister under Ben Ali since 1999 and one of the RCD's party officials since 2002.

This Administration retained former ministers under Ben Ali, but the Prime Minister also appointed opposition politicians such as Najib Chebbi, Chair of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), as Minister of Regional and Local Development and Ahmed Brahim of the Ettajdid Party (former communist party) as Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, and offered Doctor Mustapha Ben Jaafar of the Ettakatol Party the position of Public Health Minister. The latter refused the post to express his disagreement with the presence of former RCD ministers. On 18 January, the UGTT decided to leave the government for the same reasons. Two conflicting positions appeared: those who believed the revolution should wipe the slate clean and those who, like Najib Chebbi and Ahmed Brahim, ascribed their presence in government to the fear of an institutional vacuum. The second Ghanouchi Administration included many technocrats. For this administration, the transition was to be effected by way of a presidential election organised in a few months, even before revising the Constitution. But the project was thwarted by an opposition front by the name of 14 January Front, which was against maintaining the existing constitutional framework. Composed of actors from the Tunisian left and labour unionists, this Front demanded the dissolution of all institutions inherited from the former regime, such as the Parliament, Senate and the Supreme Council of Magistrates. They called for an election of a Constituent Assembly within a year. They were quickly joined by 28 associations and political parties.

In reality, these first two administrations had a difficult task, for they needed to go from a government using fear and repression to dominate to a government of legitimacy. This change needed to be not only institutional but also symbolic, and the presence of a former minister under Ben Ali at the head of the government was not a symbol of rupture. More generally, the debate revolved around two key questions: must there be a break with the past, or should one work in continuity, accepting the political actors and institutions to avoid a political vacuum and chaos?

As of March 2011, the reference to the Bourguiba regime partially and temporarily filled the institutional vacuum. When the second Ghanouchi administration was deposed, it was the turn of Béji Caïd Essebsi, a former minister under Bourguiba, to lead the government. Ben Ali's political personnel seemed too compromised to be legitimate. This third provisional government organised the transition, demonstrating pragmatism and marking its distance with the Ben Ali era.

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Prime Minister Caïd Essebsi suspended the Constitution of 1959 and acted firmly against the stir of protest resurfacing at the Kasbah, i.e. the government square. He fused the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution and the National Commission for Political Reform to create the Higher Authority for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transition.

In fact, the Authority's name was highly symbolic insofar as it combined three key terms: revolution, reform and transition. It also represented the end of the dichotomy between the revolutionary and legalist rationales. Yet the change affected the very functions of the Higher Authority. Although it had no decision-making power, the Higher Authority, presided by the lawyer Yadh Ben Achour, became the true driving force of the transition.

It operated on two different levels: a Council of Experts for the Higher Authority composed of jurists and a second Council composed of labour union, political and association personnel, as well as legal entities, which examined, ratified or rejected the texts submitted by the Council of Experts. The texts accepted and voted in by majority by the Council of Experts were then sent to the provisional government, then the President of the Republic. Thus, executive power resided in the hands of the government and the Presidency of the Republic. But in drawing up these texts, the Higher Authority acted as a provisional legislative power and, to a certain extent, a parliament.

On 12 April 2011, the Higher Authority unanimously adopted a new electoral law. This law stipulated elections by proportional representation by largest remainder method and respecting gender parity. This electoral method, which tends to favour small parties, prevented major parties from becoming preponderant at the Assembly. The importance of its mission exposed it to sharp criticism. Certain critics reproached it for its lack of representativeness, pointing out the fact that not all sensibilities were included in it. But its legitimacy was likewise questioned because its members were appointed and not elected. For certain parties, this Higher Authority was progressively becoming a parliament, thus usurping the powers of the Constituent Assembly.

Building Democracy

The first period of the transition, which began with the departure of President Ben Ali on 14 January 2011, was consolidated by the elections on 23 October 2011. This historic vote had the task of electing the 217 members of the new Constituent Assembly. A true political turning point, this election ended half a century of manipulated elections. It was carefully prepared beforehand through an electoral law passed by consensus by the different, authorised political parties. A central element in the transition process, the electoral law was developed by civil society actors that had been formerly marginalised and often repressed for their struggle for human rights and Rule of Law. These symbolic figures opted for a likewise symbolic rupture with the past insofar as electoral practices as well as the voter lists available to the Ministry of the Interior. Everything was built from scratch and new ballot boxes were ordered for the elections – a landmark event of the post-revolution transition.

The results of the elections meant a complete reconfiguration of the political landscape. The Islamist Ennahda party took the elections with 41.47% of the votes, thus obtaining 89 seats in the Constituent Assembly. Moncef Marzouki's Congress for the Republic (CPR, left-wing nationalist) won 30 seats and Ettakatol, presided by Mustapha Ben Jaafar (social democratic) won 20. The surprise was *Aridha Chaabia* (Popular Petition), a party established by a wealthy Tunisian businessman residing in London, which took fourth place.

These results show that the Tunisians did not really vote for platforms but for those who embodied a rupture with the past. The victory of the three parties gaining seats in the Assembly illustrates the birth of a new centre whose actors are bearers of a double message: respect for democratic rules and advancement of the Arab-Muslim tradition and identity.

Yet considering the architecture of the electoral law, this centre formed by three parties was to govern as part of a wholly unprecedented coalition. This troika is naturally not unified – indeed, far from it – but its

parts are constrained to work together. Fissures quickly appeared in the exercise of government, first between the three parties and then within each party. In the Constituent Assembly, the leaders of the three parties share political functions during the transitional period that will lead Tunisians to other elections whose results are as yet unknown: Moncef Marzouki is President of the Republic, Hamadi Jebali Prime Minister and Ben Jaafar President of the Assembly. The difficulty of working jointly to govern the country and draft a constitution is exacerbated by the constant tensions that often turn to conflicts between two highly differentiated segments of Tunisian society. Though there are two camps effectively in conflict since President Ben Ali's departure, the dividing lines are not clear-cut. The "modernist" camp includes left-wing and extreme left-wing parties, but also women's rights associations. The opposing, Islamist camp includes the Ennahda party, of course, but also the movement existing within this party constituting a sort of underlying, more diversified base that not only comprises Islamist associations and the *Hizb al-Tahrir* Salafists but also others.

The "modernists", who define themselves as liberals, actively defend progressive and feminist values. In opposition to them, the Islamists advocate a modernity rooted in Islam and individual freedom limited not only by the freedom of others but also and above all by religious moral and virtue. The two positions are another's negative.

At the beginning of 2012, the Second Tunisian Republic started off in a totally transformed political landscape whose contours may seem difficult to grasp for Tunisians. An Assembly in charge of drafting the Constitution of the Second Tunisian Republic was elected by universal suffrage. The leaders of CPR and Ettakatol, having accepted the posts to which they were elected, left gaps difficult to fill in their respective parties, which quickly fissured under the effect of massive disaffiliation of members who were not very happy about the alliance of their party with the Islamists in the troika. These two troika parties were thus weakened, strengthening the hegemony of the Islamist Ennahda party, whose charismatic leader, Rashid Ghanouchi, had strategically declined a post. Regularly consulted on political, social and religious issues, he plays the role of a "sage," which embodies the politician's centre of gravity.

Hence, several months after the elections of 23 October, the political transition continues, though on a less stable note. It is true that the election winners, the Is-

lamists, are having difficulty turning their electoral victory into a margin for political manoeuvre. They are legitimate and repeatedly state the fact, but they have no political experience and have difficulty going from an "opposition party" that evolved underground to a party of the masses governing the country.

Moreover, the transition, and even more so, elections, have revealed the existence of two Tunisias. The first primarily voted for the Islamists because for them, they embody a rupture with the Ben Ali period, but also integrity. It is a more conservative Tunisia that believes that the change will come from moralising political life. The second Tunisia is more westernised. It is anxious to safeguard the reforms of the Bourguiba era insofar as women's rights, education and public health.

The winter of 2012 was punctuated by tensions between the two camps, whether at universities, in the streets or between Ennahda and the national trade union, UGTT. Imbued with the modernity of the Nation-State, the ideology of the modernist elite and its own history and emancipating sensibility, the UGTT is considered close to the ideals of the modernists, yet it is not a political party. It intends to influence the course of the history being forged by defending workers and the unemployed.

These standoffs between modernists and conservatives have crystallised around the media, the Islamists having the sensation that the latter do not reflect their electoral victory and their position in the political arena.

These conflicts, which may seem typical in periods of democratic construction, are taking place with the underlying factor of an acute social and economic crisis. The social crisis originating the revolution is not over. Even worse, it has become aggravated as factories close and under the effects of the scarcity of foreign and national investors. The system can only be relaunched once confidence between governors and governed is restored and in a secure environment. The signs of fracture between different projects for society complicate matters, and the rupture between past and present seems more and more difficult to define. The content of this rupture is not clear to anyone. What should be salvaged from the past and what corresponds to the famous "values of the revolution" so oft cited by all? Though there has been a demand for rupture by the civil society, there has, however, been no real institutional rupture and the transition has gone rather smoothly because the rupture was neither straightforward nor complete.