

Tunisia: Waiting for Spring

Ridha Kefi

Journal Director, *Kapitalis*, Tunis

Editorial Consultant, *afkar/idées*, Barcelona

Three years after the fall of the former dictatorial Ben Ali regime on 14 January 2011 that set off the shock wave of popular uprisings of the Arab Spring, where is Tunisia now with regard to its project for democratic transition?

The reply to this question is qualified. On the one hand, and in comparison to what has been happening over the course of the past three years in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria, where the situation remains politically fragile if not altogether tragic, as in the case of Syria, Tunisia has fared rather advantageously, with perspectives that generally give cause for optimism. On the other hand, although this transition has achieved genuine gains, it remains indecisive, quite slow, at times confused and subject to being called into question, whereas the difficult economic situation is a dark cloud looming on the horizon, creating social tensions that could jeopardise the hopes placed on what Western commentators call the “Jasmine Revolution.”

From Confrontation to Consensus

The rise to power of the Ennahda Islamist movement on 23 October 2011 as a result of the first free and transparent elections in the country’s history made progressive democrats, whether liberal or left-wing, fear the worst. Though they were defeated in the elections, they continue to have a strong influence over civil society. The rise of religious extremism and its corollaries, terrorism and political violence, namely with the assassination of two opposition leaders

– Chokri Belaïd on 6 February 2013 and Mohamed Brahmi on 25 July 2013 – as well as the threat of a return to dictatorship, this time theocratic, have likewise cast doubt on the political transition’s chances of success.

The worst has, however, been avoided, thanks to strong opposition by civil society, and in particular youth and women, to the attempts at progressive Islamisation of society. The friendly pressure of Tunisia’s international partners (the European Union and United States) has likewise helped a great deal, by pushing the “Troika,” the coalition in power dominated by Ennahda, to make concessions in order to preserve the country’s unity on the basis of a minimal consensus where conservative Islamists and progressive democrats could ultimately benefit and avoid a confrontation whose dangerous consequences they recognise.

In this regard, it must be said that the recollection of the “Dark Decade” in neighbouring Algeria (1990–2000), the spectacle of violent clashes in Syria, the takeover by the military in Egypt and the threats by armed groups in neighbouring Libya seem to have prompted the political actors towards moderation and opened them to making reciprocal concessions. The first consequence of this rapprochement: the new constitution, adopted on 26 January 2014 by an overwhelming majority (200 votes in favour, 12 against and 4 abstentions) and enacted on 10 February of the same year, was the result of a compromise negotiated between Ennahda, which had a relative majority in the Constituent Assembly, and the progressive democratic forces backed by a highly protest-spirited civil society. This document, drafted with great effort after tough negotiations, proclaims a certain number of freedoms (including freedom of expression, freedom of information and freedom of conscience), establishes a dual executive whereby the

powers of the head of government and the President of the republic are relatively balanced, does not lend a preponderant role to Islam as the Islamists wanted at the outset, and, for the first time in the legal history of the Arab world, introduces the goal of male-female parity in elected assemblies.

The second consequence of this rapprochement: the National Dialogue officially launched in October 2013, under the leadership of a “Quartet” of national organisations (UGTT, UTICA, LTDH and the Bar Association),¹ resulted in the formation, in January 2014, of a government of independent national experts presided by the technocrat, Mehdi Jomaa, a man in his fifties whose entire career had been in the private sector. This administration, which succeeded two cabinets presided by Islamist leaders (Hamadi Jebali and Ali Laarayedh), is the outcome of a common will to prevent the strong political polarisation dividing society into two diametrically opposed camps from leading to a confrontation whose consequences all parties fear.

The main mission of the new government of independent technocrats is to restore security, revitalise the economy, alleviate social unrest and establish the conditions necessary for free and transparent elections before the end of 2014

The main mission of the new government of independent technocrats is to restore security, revitalise the economy, alleviate social unrest, particularly in disadvantaged regions, the cradle of the revolution, and above all, establish the security, political and logistic conditions necessary for free and transparent elections before the end of 2014, elections expected to bring the country out of a transitional phase lasting longer than foreseen and place it on the road towards constitutional legality.

In this context, it must review the thousands of Ennahda partisans appointed to important administra-

tive and public enterprise positions (ministerial cabinet attachés, policy officers, prefects, sub-prefects, executive directors, audiovisual media directors, etc.) because they could influence the course of the elections through their respective positions and prerogatives. This requirement is, in fact, included in the “National Dialogue Roadmap” signed by all parties, including Ennahda, and on the basis of which the Mehdi Jomaa Administration was established.

Islamists, or Democracy in Retreat

One question, however, remains to be asked: how could Ennahda, which two years earlier believed it could impose its unshared domination of the political sphere, even attempting to push through a constitution of Islamist connotations, consent to engage in a National Dialogue which ended in its leaving the government and the promulgation of a consensual Fundamental Law lending particular attention to the demands of liberal and left-wing parties?

On the morrow of the 23 October 2011 elections that put the Islamists in power, a series of significant events profoundly affected the country, creating a situation of continuous tension.

First there was the attack on the American embassy in Tunis on 6 September 2012 by Ennahda followers associated with Jihadi Salafists of the Ansar Al-Sharia movement, aligned with Al Qaeda, which initiated a fracture in the Islamist party between the moderate, centrist factions and the extremists, aligned with Jihadi Salafist movements, particularly since the Administration had to take action against the latter, who suddenly went from the status of Ennahda allies to daunting adversaries.

This was followed by the assassination of the radical left leader, Chokri Belaïd, on 6 February 2013 by a group of religious extremists belonging to Ansar Al-Sharia. Over a million people accompanied the deceased to his final resting place. This was the largest popular gathering in the country’s history, expressing a generalised exasperation and addressing a message of rejection to the Islamist power.

Distressed by this assassination, Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali attempted to constitute a government

¹ UGTT: Union générale tunisienne du travail (Tunisian General Trade Union, the national labour union confederation); UTICA: Union tunisienne de l’industrie, du commerce et de l’artisanat (Tunisian Union for Industry, Commerce and Handicrafts, the national employers’ union confederation); LTDH: Ligue tunisienne de défense des droits de l’homme (Tunisian Human Rights League).

of technocrats to conduct the remainder of the transition phase, but he was thwarted by his own party, Ennahda, and had to resign, giving up his position to the Minister of the Interior, Ali Laarayedh, also a former leader of the Islamist party. This did not fail to aggravate the party fracture between the moderate elements rallying around their leader Rashid Ghannushi, and the extremists, who reproach Ennahda, among other things for having succumbed to the pressure of the opposition and of civil society and given up the project to clearly set down in the constitution that Sharia would be the main source of legislation.

There was another determining factor in changing the Islamists' attitude: the economic crisis, which fuelled social movements throughout the country, rendering the government's task more difficult, since part of its members, coming out of prison and/or exile, had no experience in the sphere of public administration. Learning the trade proved difficult and the results were rather negative, if not wholly catastrophic. Ennahda then realised that it could no longer monopolise power without running the risk of leading the country to an economic catastrophe and paying the consequences, whether through a protest vote in the next elections or a new popular revolt. It thus began to reach out to the opposition to attempt to smooth out differences, set the political calendar and accelerate the establishment of conditions for transparent elections in a spirit of national consensus.

There was another determining factor in changing the Islamists' attitude: the economic crisis, which fuelled social movements throughout the country, rendering the government's task more difficult

The National Dialogue, launched over the course of May 2013 with the participation of the political parties and the main national organisations (employers' associations, trade unions, human rights organisations, bar association, etc.), was soon, however, treading water, namely due to the intransigence of Ennahda's radical wing. The latter, highly active in

the Constituent Assembly and the media, did not accept the Islamist party's making any further concessions. It opposed "electoral legitimacy" to the "consensual legitimacy" invoked by the opposition as the only means to make the democratic transition advance.

It was then that two incidents occurred that spelled the last straw for popular discontent: the assassination of opposition leader Mohamed Brahmi on 25 July 2013, when the country was celebrating Republic Day, and the massacre of eight soldiers at Mount Chaambi four days later by a terrorist group entrenched in this mountainous area on the Tunisian-Algerian border.

A majority of Tunisians could no longer abide the government's laxness in matters of security and its incompetence in the economic sphere, and demanded it step down

The first consequences of this earthquake: some 60 opposition members left the Assembly to protest against the government's laxness in the face of terrorism. In the aftermath, the Assembly's work was suspended during nearly two months by the President of the Constituent Assembly, Mustapha Ben Jaâfar, who hoped to thus absorb the shock caused by the second political assassination in the country in less than six months. Numerous protest marches organised by opposition parties and national organisations (27 July, 6 August, 13 August, 6 September, 23 October...) as part of the "Erhal" (Leave!) campaign, rallied tens of thousands of male and above all female citizens at each protest, thus demonstrating, as if it weren't obvious enough, that a majority of Tunisians could no longer abide the government's laxness in matters of security and its incompetence in the economic sphere, and demanding it step down. This majority, moreover, was already beginning to stand out in opinion polls, which showed voting intentions shifting towards the opposition. The latter, at this point united under the National Salvation Front (Front de salut national, FSN), found precious support in the four main national organisations rallying to its positions: the UGTT, UTICA, the LTDH

and the Bar Association, as well as many civil society figures and associations.

The FSN rightly estimated that the Ali Laarayedh Administration, incompetent and above all partisan, could not continue to lead the country, much less oversee the organisation of elections. It even went as far as to call for the dissolution, pure and simple, of the political system emerging from the 23 October 2011 elections (Constituent Assembly, provisional government and provisional presidencies) and the formation of a national salvation government comprised of independent experts that would commit not to run in the next elections.

It is thus under the effect of this strong pressure, both popular and political, that Ennahda consented to engage, at first reluctantly, then eagerly and with conviction, in the National Dialogue and sign the Roadmap, thus sealing its “departure from the government but not from power,” according to its leader, Rashid al-Ghannushi. The latter surely meant to express that the Islamists, who predominate in the Assembly, retain the power of control over the Mehdi Jomaa Administration, which they can topple at any time by a simple vote of no confidence. This is a simplistic hypothesis, for it is unlikely that Ennahda dare to go over to the opposition, knowing that it can take credit for the dividends of an eventual end to the crisis and thus retain its chances of a return to government in the coming elections.

The Narrow Margin of the Jomaa Administration

The Jomaa administration, whose constitution in late January 2014 was welcomed with great relief by both Tunisians and the country’s foreign partners, namely the Europeans and Americans, enjoys a favourable disposition towards it for the time being.

Apart from their independence vis-à-vis political parties (which constitutes both their strength and their weakness), its members can be distinguished by their youth, competence and mastery of their respective fields. Their profiles likewise break with those of their predecessors, who were more politicians than administrators. For the time being, no party has ventured to call their credibility into question or criticise their decisions.

In any case, the task of the new administration promises to be even more difficult, given that the general situation in Tunisia has deteriorated greatly over the course of the past three years. Let’s take stock: the unemployment rate remains very high (approximately 17%, with peaks of 40% in some regions in the West and South), inflation has peaked at nearly 7%, the budget deficit surpasses 6%, the dinar (the national currency) is plummeting against the euro, widening trade and balance of payment deficits, while the level of foreign debt is dangerously close to 50% of the GDP. Moreover, the downgrading of the country’s sovereign rating on 3 or 4 occasions in less than two years renders any outlet on the international financial markets hypothetical and does not encourage investors, national or foreign, to launch new projects.

Moreover, and for a country whose economy depends up to 70-80% on foreign trade with the European Union (tourism, exports of goods and services, FDI, remittances from expatriate workers, etc.), the current crisis in Europe and above all France (Tunisia’s premiere supplier, premiere client and premiere foreign investor, etc.) dangerously complicates the situation. The preceding administration had a hard time mobilising the resources necessary to balance the State budget for the 2013 fiscal year due to the low revenue as a result of the economic downturn. It also had a hard time balancing the budget for 2014, mainly because it had lost the confidence of the traditional lending agencies (World Bank, IMF, European Union...), which suspended their financial aid, justifying their decision by the country’s absence of political visibility.

The current administration, which has inherited such a severely compromised situation, knows that its room for manoeuvring is narrow. Though it has managed to regain the confidence of international funding agencies, it knows it needs to make painful trade-offs to allocate the scarce financial resources available

The current administration, which has inherited such a severely compromised situation, knows that its room

The other problem facing the Jomaa administration concerns subsidising commodities and hydrocarbons. It now represents nearly 3% of the GDP, that is, over half of the budgetary deficit, estimated at 7.4%

for manoeuvring is narrow. Though it has managed, since taking office, to regain the confidence of international funding agencies, which have been quick to lend their support, it knows it needs to make painful trade-offs to allocate the scarce financial resources available so as to obtain rapid results without jeopardising the initiation of reforms (banking system, taxation, award of public contracts, investment law, etc.) demanded by these same international funding agencies and whose effects will only be felt in the medium and long terms.

The other problem facing the Jomaa administration concerns subsidising commodities and hydrocarbons (electricity, natural gas, oil), which have increased by 30% from 2010 to 2013, dangerously encumbering the national budget. It now represents nearly 3% of the GDP, that is, over half of the budgetary deficit, estimated at 7.4%. Energy product

subsidies alone represent 60% of the Compensation Fund budget. However, they do not benefit only the underprivileged, whose share is only 11% of the total, but also and above all the middle and upper-class sectors and economic operators, including certain energy-intensive industries.

Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa, the former minister of industry, is aware of these inconsistencies, which cost the taxpayers dearly. In his speech in late January before the Assembly, he thus insisted on “bringing the system for subsidising certain products under control” as one of the priorities of his administration. He will undoubtedly endeavour to reduce fuel subsidies by using the system of targeted subsidies recommended by the World Bank, that is, granting 11% of the subsidy amounts in the form of direct aid to the underprivileged population.

This decision will not be to the liking of industrialists, who consider the relatively low cost of energy a competitive factor. The central employer’s association (UTICA) has already expressed its strong opposition. The fact remains, however, that the government has no other choice, particularly since the loans disbursed by the IMF, World Bank and EU cannot be used to palliate the growing deficit of the Compensation Fund or the national budget, but rather to stimulate investment, create employment and boost the economic machine.