

Tunisia and Libya in the Intra-Maghrebi Dynamics of the Arab Spring

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Due to the breadth of the upheavals in the Arab world over the past months, it has been said and written everywhere that the latter will “never be the same,” without, however, the least idea of what it could really become, as the situations remain highly complex and fluctuating.

Insofar as the Maghrebi arena in particular, attention should be placed on the two countries having experienced a change in regime, for the situations in Tunisia on the one hand and Libya on the other shed light on the political and social dynamics underway in a Maghreb that has changed profoundly over the past year. Analysis and critical thought reveal the real issues and the most significant characteristics that best reflect the transitions underway.

The uprisings leading to Ben Ali’s departure in January 2011 and the Western intervention that led to Gaddafi’s downfall and execution in October 2011 inaugurated a new and complex historical stage whose future evolutions we are still far from understanding.

Nevertheless, numerous indicators do allow us to consider the unity or risks of division or even implosion of Libya as well as the re-Islamisation or even Salafisation of Tunisia.

Complex and Unpredictable Libya

Since the liberation of Libya, marked by the fall of Tripoli and Gaddafi’s lynching, the transition is being

undertaken by an interim government headed by the National Transitional Council (NTC). The latter had succeeded in garnering the support of the International Community and obtaining the Western intervention that allowed the military defeat and overthrow of the Gaddafi regime,¹ but it is far from managing to reach a consensus, a condition necessary for a pacific, democratic transition. But can we speak of a pacific, democratic transition in Libya when the country already suffers from clear leadership weakness and a number of divisions?

Leadership Weakness

After over seven months of bombardments, the deaths of thousands of civilians, the destruction of a large part of Libyan infrastructures, the regional and tribal rivalries channelled under Gaddafi’s dictatorship took the upper hand and the Islamists, combated under his regime, are now at the forefront. The presence of militant radical Islamist groups, unnoticed at the beginning of the uprising, proved a determining factor and is today key. A great number of Libyan jihadi Salafists have returned from Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen to fight alongside the civilian population that initially rose up against Gaddafi; the Islamists freed from prison several months earlier by Saif El-Islam found in the insurrection the unexpected opportunity to liquidate a regime that had fiercely combated them.

Today, the NTC is at the head of a country battered by the violence and fighting of a civil war, a country profoundly divided into tribes and clans, in which organised militia and armies control different parts of the territory, including the major cities of Tripoli and Benghazi.

¹ The cost of this war amounted to 300 million euros for France, 300 million pounds (i.e. 343 million euros) for the United Kingdom and 500 million dollars (approximately 395 million euros) for the United States. *Le Figaro international*, 21 October 2011.

The emergence of multiple political actors and various decision-making centres undeniably weakens an NTC that seems more and more like a creation of Western powers and a body far from reflecting the country's diversity or its majority ideological orientation, some not hesitating to accuse it of extreme secularism.²

Grown strong from the seizure of large quantities of arms taken from Gaddafi's arsenals and those that foreign powers placed at their disposal during the conflict, the militias are now engaging in combat and fighting together against an NTC that is quickly losing ground.

The latter, which has not succeeded in disarming the militias, is encountering the greatest difficulty in channelling the influence of the *katiba* (battalions): whether that of Ismail Sallabi³ or of Abdelhakim Belhaj.⁴

Weakened and questioned by the Islamists on the one hand, and by the Arab-speaking Imazighen (Berbers) of Zentan and the Amazigh-speaking Imazighen (Berbers) of Zouara and Djebel Nefoussa on the other, all of them determined to play the role that had always been denied them by the former regime, the NTC seems to have neither the military means nor the political will to enter into conflict with these groups, and its president, weakened and powerless, no longer rules out the possibility of civil war. Moreover, clashes between groups of ex-rebels defending local or regional interests took place in Tripoli in January 2012, causing five deaths and over a dozen wounded.

For the NTC, which must define the orientations of the new Libya and start drawing up a Constitution and organising elections for 2012, the task is difficult and the construction of a national consensus is proving impossible in such a context. Given the struggle for power between militias and the rivalries between tribes – the Warfalla are divided, the Tubu and Zuwaya in conflict – the risk of civil war and the rupture of Libya's territorial integrity cannot be ruled out.⁵

The Risks of Territorial Implosion

Due to the many dissensions and rivalries between tribal groups and between these groups and the NTC, the risk of territorial implosion can no longer be ruled out. Moreover, the Transitional Council was not able to prevent Cyrenaica's declaration of autonomy. It was proclaimed on 6 March 2012 by the Congress of the People of Cyrenaica, which considers itself wronged by the NTC and which has recognised as its leader Ahmed Zubaïr al-Sanussi, a relative of King Idris I overthrown in 1969 by Colonel Gaddafi and member of the Sanussi Brotherhood.

A number of reasons led to this decision and shed light on the situation in Libya: apart from the fact that it reflects the NTC's lack of legitimacy, this decision is likewise revealing of the religious conflicts in Sunni Libya, or more precisely, conflicts on religious practices; Cyrenaica, a conservative stronghold, wanted to overcome the obstacles set up by the Salafist and Wahhabi Islamists of Tripolitania to its traditional and customary practices, in particular the cult to the saints or Marabouts.⁶ Yet Cyrenaica's desire for autonomy, a region that spans the country from north to south and has important mineral resources and oil and gas pipelines and terminals, likewise reveals rivalries for control of oilfields, pipelines and oil terminals on the Mediterranean.

Add to this scenario the rebellion of the Tuaregs, who supposedly have ties with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), whom the Libyan chaos has allowed to replenish with weapons and members, not to mention the migrant flow and arms traffic of all sorts, all elements that could accentuate territorial and political destabilisation in the region. Yet a partition of Libya would nonetheless be a serious sign and a dangerous precedent for all the Arab countries in revolt and whose borders were arbitrarily defined by occupying powers. It would also constitute an equally destabilising factor insofar as the territorial integrity of certain African States such as Chad or Niger, faced with armed rebellions.

² Despite the declarations of NTC Chairman Mustapha Abdeljalil, former Minister of Justice under Gaddafi, on the incontrovertible role of Sharia during the celebration of Libyan Liberation Day: "Any law contradicting the precepts of Islam shall be considered illegal. The law governing marriage and divorce is illegal and will be repealed because it contradicts Sharia."

³ Benghazi strongman who fought in Misrata at the head of the 17th February Brigade and advocates the advent of Sharia.

⁴ Head of the Tripoli Military Council and former Al-Qaeda jihadi imprisoned for 6 years, he is one of the Islamists freed after negotiations led by Saïf el Islam.

⁵ A division of Libya similar to that of Yugoslavia would have serious consequences on the entire region by multiplying the areas of autonomous governance, as well as on relations between neighbours in the Maghreb, Sahel and Middle East.

⁶ In addition to its tribal and territorial divisions, Libya is also split among rival brotherhoods, with two main –Sufi– groups, Senussi and Tijani, associated with Algeria.

In the face of this situation, Western powers are strangely silent: France, Great Britain and the United States, allied in Libya, did not want to see that the uprising in Libya was fostered, organised and directed by Islamists from the start, and today seem more concerned with the economic repercussions than the country's political situation.⁷ Only Qatar, the Arab guarantee against NATO intervention, is attempting to influence the Libyan military terrain, as it has done in the financial and political sphere, and it continues to be involved in post-Gaddafi Libya by supporting the Salafists and former jihadis. This role as sponsor of political Islam irritates the authorities in Tripoli, who suspect it of being behind the schemes to divide the country sought by certain Libyan groups and promoted by Western plans, thus lending greater feasibility to the country's risk of rupture.

Tunisia: The New Forces Present

Tunisia is at present the only country of the Arab Spring whose revolution has led to a democratic process which has taken place according to the most honourable criteria and within the established timeframe. Whereas the other countries of the Arab Spring are still experiencing situations of chaos, repression, upholding of the established order, worrisome silence or troubling wait-and-see attitudes, Tunisia elected a Constituent Assembly that is working on drafting the new Constitution. A major national debate has begun on the country's orientation and future personality, and efforts are being made on all sides to take the country out of the terrible economic crisis into which the Arab Spring has plunged it. Given the political and economic context, it is not surprising that the situation remains fluctuating, uncertain and worrisome.

The Singularity of the Tunisian Transition

After rioting that lasted several weeks, resulted in 300 deaths and caused the downfall of the Ben Ali regime, a relatively well-organised democratisation

process was launched and has been working to date in a satisfactory manner.

The elections held last 23 October, in an open and transparent manner according to observers, allowed the establishment of a Constituent Assembly dominated by the Islamist party, Ennahda, which won the majority of votes in the elections. From the start of the Arab Spring, and whereas Libya underwent foreign intervention, Syria is sinking into civil war and Egypt and Yemen did not experience the revolutionary process through to its end, Tunisia continues to distinguish itself by its orderly, pacific transition, in which the debate on the country's future is the main focus and covers all political and social issues.

Hence Tunisia, the most secular of the Arab-Muslim countries, has witnessed the rise to power of the Tunisian Islamists who, we must recall, played no role whatsoever in the outbreak of the revolts in December 2010 - January 2011 and did not but discreetly accompany the popular determination that led to President Ben Ali's departure. Nevertheless, with a profound rooting in the country and benefiting from hidden financial support, they quickly orchestrated the triumphal return of Rachid Ghannouchi, head of the Ennahda party, from his long exile in London, and deployed an active electoral campaign in which their status as the eternal opponents weighed heavily. Their success at the polls placed them at the head of the Tunisian political scene, although theoretically, the government is composed of a tripartite coalition with two other parties that are secular and liberal.

But Tunisia, which is struggling to cope with the collapse of tourism,⁸ a situation that has led thousands of youth to unemployment and precariousness, is faced with a severe economic and financial crisis. After the drop in foreign investments,⁹ Tunisia has met with the greatest difficulty in attracting new investors, recovering those that have left and convincing those that are hesitating. This economic situation, described by some as disastrous, contributes to social malaise and accentuates the feeling of insecurity.

Despite the difficulties and progress that is at times chaotic, Tunisia, whence came the first shockwave, has succeeded in setting up an elected Parliament and a legitimate government, thus instituting the

⁷ "France wishes to profit from its action in Libya," Matthias BLAMONT, *Le Monde*, 20 December 2011; "British firms urged to 'pack suitcases' in rush for Libya business" Jo ADETUNJI, *The Guardian*, 21 October 2011.

⁸ The tourism sector registered a 33% decline in revenue in 2011, according to the Director General of the Tunisian National Tourism Office, 9 February 2012.

⁹ There was a drop of 29.2% in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in 2011, according to the Foreign Investment Promotion Agency (FIPA), 3 February 2012.

most successful transition model of the Arab Spring. Yet the Islamists of Ennahda are not the only actors of this transition. Indeed, whereas the liberal parties are divided and marginalised, only the Salafists seem to be taking the fore, capable of imposing the agenda and the terms of debate.

Towards a Planned Salafisation?

Describing itself as a moderate Islamist party modelled on the Turkish AKP party, Ennahda has sought to be reassuring, promising not to undermine civil liberties but to protect them. Yet the party is increasingly obliged to compromise with the Salafists, whose influence is being increasingly felt in the public and political spheres. Indeed, numbering few and obliged to hide under the Ben Ali regime, the Tunisian Salafists today are growing more and more active, recruiting members from all walks of life. Determined not to remain on the margins of society, they have gradually taken over public space, taken control of hundreds of mosques and created numerous Koranic schools. Considering it their duty to change Tunisian society by leading it towards Islam and strengthening Muslim faith and beliefs, they attempt to impose religious conduct, not hesitating to resort to threats and verbal or physical violence. With the goal of moralising, that is, Salafising public life, violent, spectacular actions have been undertaken in the past few months – attacks against brothels in a number of Tunisian cities, attacks against a cinema theatre in Tunis, protests against a television station and occupation of the universities in Sousse and Tunis –, building a social climate of mistrust, apprehension and fear. The aim is to influence the debate on the Constitution and impose the establishment of Sharia as the sole source of legislation. Moreover, the Salafists are literally occupying the terrain, with recurrent protests,¹⁰ taking control of public spaces to establish codes of conduct or laws in keeping with radical Islam. They seem to be engaged in a real battle with the government and everything would indicate that they are winning. Indeed, to date, the police and the authorities have proven powerless, leading some to accuse the government of approval, complacency or sympathy towards the Salafists, as if the authorities were allowing the Salafists to impose a programme that they do not believe they could

afford to openly establish themselves and can only reveal tangentially. This was the case when the Prime Minister raised the idea of a sixth caliphate or when the new Minister of Higher Education's first decision was to create a degree in Islamic Finance.¹¹ Rachid Ghanouchi also confirmed his party's spirit of conciliation and accommodation with regard to the Salafists when he qualified them as "an intellectual movement with which we must engage in dialogue." It would seem that nothing could hinder Salafist activism, to the great concern of the Secular and Liberal proponents, who are witnessing how their revolution, begun without a party, programme or leader, is now being taken over by the Salafists, who are ready to use it against them. And likewise to the greatest concern of Tunisian women, the main actors of the uprising, who had hoped to gain more rights and equality and are witnessing how their revolution is being monopolised by the very ones who deny them their rights and liberties.

Conclusion

Whereas Algeria has to date been spared the winds of revolution that have been shaking the Arab world for over a year now and Morocco, under the aegis of the King, has undertaken constitutional reforms in accordance with the Justice and Development Party (PJD) that won the legislative elections of November 2011, guaranteeing the regime's stability and the monarchy's permanency for the time being, Tunisia and Libya, the two countries that experienced real upheavals, continue to follow their own dynamics and define the issues of the new Maghreb. Thus, the Arab Spring has given rise to the Islamism that the dictators had fought against and prohibited. This new factor is modifying the balance of powers in the Maghreb, relegating Algeria, nearly overwhelmed by the events, to the rank of observer and allowing Tunisia to dream of a new foreign policy orientation.¹²

In addition to the social and economic challenges that the region has been experiencing for decades and that the Arab Spring has aggravated, there is also the challenge of democratisation, whose outcome no-one can predict, and the new security challenges that the Libyan context has engendered, which will not fail to affect all Mediterranean countries.

¹⁰ On 16 December, over 5000 people joined a protest in Tunis demanding the application of Sharia.

¹¹ Earlier, in August, the first Koranic school of Tunisia opened in Sidi Al-Bokri on the road to Bizerte, some twenty kilometres from the capital.

¹² The initiative to relaunch the Arab Maghreb Union, hosting the Friends of Syria Conference, President Marzouki's trip through Africa, etc.