

Tunisia, 10 Years after the Promising Spring: The Harsh Realities of the Democratic Transition

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On 14 January 2021, Tunisia celebrated the 10th anniversary of its revolution, the Revolution for Freedom and Dignity, catalyst of the Arab Spring. Despite the great expectations generated in 2011, the results today are more than mixed and future prospects remain uncertain.

Of course, a democratic transition is always accompanied by a weakening of the State and a loss of economic efficiency and effectiveness, as well as a certain frustration among the population, who believed in a significant improvement in their living conditions.

Tunisia is no exception to this general pattern, but the beginnings of a recovery – even a relative one – are slow in coming.

A Democracy that's Losing Its Bearings

The first democratic election in the country's history took place on 23 October 2011. It was the election of the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), tasked with drafting a new constitution to underpin and guarantee the sustainability of democracy. Since then, Tunisians have been called to the polls seven times: two legislative elections (2014 and 2019), two presidential elections with two rounds (2014 and 2018) and municipal elections.

The Islamist movement, Ennahdha, won three elections: the first one with a significant lead (the NCA in 2011, with 37% of the votes cast and 89 deputies

out of 217), the second one with a slightly lower mark (the 2018 municipal elections, with 28% of the votes), and in the third one (the 2019 legislative elections), it did not even receive a fifth of the votes (19.6%).²

The major winner of the 2014 general elections (presidential and legislative), the modernist party Nidaa Tounes (Call for Tunisia), has been radically swept from the political scene. The party, which carried 38% of the vote in 2014, with 86 deputies out of 217, only garnered 1.5% of the vote for three seats in the Assembly of Representatives of the People (ARP) in 2019.

The 2014 electoral campaign was very tense and extremely polarized between the modernists (Nidaa) and the Islamists (Ennahdha), and though the latter lost quite clearly (38% for Nidaa against 28% for Ennahdha), the two parties decided to govern together during the five-year term. This soft consensus and the dissensions between the different factions of the majority party made the first post-revolutionary legislature a period of economic stagnation and political quarrels of little scope.

Is this the only reason for popular disapproval in 2019?

The Convergence of Wrath

The causes of anger of the voters who are putting the political system that emerged from the Revolution to the test are complex.

One can distinguish two basic movements of different natures but which have converged since the 2019 elections:

- A complex web that is difficult to define because its components are so diverse. It aspires to a rad-

¹ This article was written in May 2021 (editor's note).

² All figures relating to the election results are taken from the Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Élections website (www.isie.tn).

ical change that would make a clean sweep of the past. A kind of revolution that challenges all forms of hegemony of the dominant elites. This web considers itself revolutionary, anti-party system, anti-rich and anti-Western;

- A counter-revolution in the strongest sense of the term. According to this movement, the failures and setbacks of this decade are not due to the effects of unfavourable circumstances but to a “plot” that ousted Ben Ali’s patriotic regime to give power to the Islamists and their allies (mainly human rights defenders). The only way to save the country is to get rid of the whole system that emerged from the pseudo-revolution of 14 January 2011. To do so, the country needs a “real revolution,” a patriotic and anti-Islamist one, the “Enlightenment Revolution” announced at the beginning of 2021 by the leader of the Free Destourian Party (PDL), Abir Moussi, who aspires to continue the work of Bourguiba, the founder of the modern Tunisian State.

The PDL, founded in 2013, came in third in the 2019 legislative elections, with 6.6% of the votes cast. However, for a year now, it has been leading in all voting intention surveys, with nearly 40% of the vote, far ahead of the Islamist party Ennahdha, which has reached a ceiling of 20%.³

A Seedbed of Populism

Tunisia’s young democracy has quickly run out of steam in less than a decade. Yet it has achieved some undeniable feats in just a few years: putting an end to a regime of aggressive Islamization initiated by the Ennahdha movement following its broad victory in 2011. It has also succeeded in drafting a new Constitution (ratified and enacted in January 2014) that respects human rights, establishing a semi-parliamentary regime with a President of the Republic elected by universal suffrage, and pronounced decentralization and independent bodies to underpin the democratic transition.

The young democracy has weathered the terrorism that struck hard from 2013 to 2016 (several large-

scale attacks targeting the army, the police and foreign tourists at the Bardo Museum in March 2015 and a hotel in Sousse in June 2015), but the price was very high in human lives (nearly 200 victims) and an economic slump. In fact, it was the corrupt partocracy of the winners of the 2014 general elections that got the better of its patience. This, in part, explains the major victory of the populists in 2019.

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The great paradox of the Tunisian Revolution lies in the ever-widening gap between the exponential demands of all components of society (trades, regions, social classes, etc.) and the redistributive capacities of the State. All of this with almost no growth.

The “Freedom and Dignity” Revolution challenged the transcendent legitimacy of state powers. The population no longer recognizes the hegemonic role of the State, but at the same time demands that it provide for the material and symbolic needs of all social groups and individuals. It is a form of nurturing state in reverse: a nurturing state despite itself. A state obliged to sacrifice the future on the altar of an evanescent social peace.

“The Green Population”

The death of the first post-revolutionary President elected by universal suffrage, Beji Caid Essebsi, on 25 July 2019 led to an early presidential election, the final results of which were to be declared within a maximum of 90 days.

The ruling coalition presented three candidates: the Islamist Abdelfattah Mourou – interim Speaker of Parliament, the Nidaaist dissident, founder of the Tahya Tounes (Long Live Tunisia) party and head of government Youssef Chahed, and Defence Minister

³ The recent Sigma/Le Maghreb poll published in the daily newspaper *Le Maghreb* on 25 May 2021 put the PDL at 36%, against 18.6% for Ennahdha.

Abdelkarim Zebidi – who was very close to the late President and intended to continue his work. These three worthy representatives of the “system” were unfortunately eliminated in the first round: Mourou with 12.9% of the vote came third, followed by Zebidi with 10.7% and Chahed with 7.4%. The two winners of the first round (Kais Saied, with 18.4% of the votes, and Nabil Karoui, with 15.6%), as well as the majority of candidates after the leading quintet, were all more right-wing than left-wing populists. Kais Saied, a law professor, was less well-known to the general public than media mogul Nabil Karoui. He was also the most difficult to decipher. He said in his election campaign (called the “explanation campaign”) that he had no promises to make and that his only programme was to implement what the people and the youth would decide. He took up one of the main slogans of the revolutionary epic: “the people want” and he added “and they know what they want.” On this basis, Saied wished to build a form of direct, grassroots democracy, where the people always have the power to dismiss elected officials. Saied was perceived (and still is for a large part of public opinion) as a man of integrity, against the rotten party system and the authentic representative of the revolutionary ideal of “work, freedom and national dignity.” This is what allowed him to win the second round with 72.7% of the votes.⁴

Unnatural Alliances

The political situation following the 2019 general elections is rather peculiar. The leading Islamist party, with just under 20% of the vote, was unable to form a government, although its leader, the divisive Rached Ghannouchi, was elected Speaker of Parliament.

The Tunisian Constitution stipulates in Article 89 that if the leading party or coalition is unable to form a government, then the initiative lies with the President of the Republic to designate – after consultation with the parties and parliamentary groups – the person most suitable to forming a government.

The animosity between Ennahdha and Qalb Tounes (Heart of Tunisia), the party of the candidate that lost

the second round, businessman Nabil Karoui, who came second in the legislative elections, quickly turned into a strategic alliance.

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The head of government proposed by the President against the will of these two parties, Elyes Fakhfakh, even if he first managed to integrate the Islamists into his government to ensure the Parliament’s vote of confidence, was unable to last long because he constantly opposed Qalb Tounes, which had become Ennahdha’s main ally, joining the majority coalition. Taking advantage of a conflict-of-interest case concerning the head of government, revealed by the media barely three months after his investiture, Elyes Fakhfakh was forced to resign after less than five months in power. The ball is once again in the President’s court, who this time, against the advice of all parties, chose the Fakhfakh Administration’s Minister of the Interior and former legal adviser to Saied, Hichem Mechichi. Ironically, this man, who owes everything to his mentor, the President of the Republic, rebelled even before his investiture and concluded an agreement with Ennahdha, Qalb Tounes and the Alliance of Dignity (a fundamentalist and populist nebula), thus becoming head of government on 2 September 2020, against the will of the man who had proposed him a month earlier.

Deadlock or Balanced Weaknesses

Since September 2020, the political crisis has reached dangerous and imbalanced levels:

- An open struggle between the two heads of the executive going as far as the President’s

⁴ REDISSI, Hamadi, et al. *La tentation populiste*. Tunis: Cérès, 2020.

refusing to ratify a major cabinet reshuffle, even though it was approved by Parliament on 26 January 2021;

- A Parliament almost paralysed by a dysfunctional presidency and an opposition, that of Abir Moussi's PDL, using all possible and unimaginable forms of obstruction to block the Muslim Brotherhood project – i.e., Ennahdha and its allies;
- A government struggling with intractable economic and social difficulties. The recession is at 8.9% in 2021, with unemployment at 17.8% and peaking among youth (15-24 years), at over 40%;⁵
- Broad rejection among public opinion of the partisan political class and particularly of the Islamists, who have been blamed for the country's setbacks. Ennahdha is the only party that has governed or participated in all the governments of this decade, with the exception of the technocrat government of 2014;
- The refusal of the Head of State to call for national dialogue proposed by the powerful trade union federation (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail) since 30 November 2020.

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The balance of power is in fact a balance of weaknesses. Each party can hinder the action of its opponents/enemies, but no party is able to prevail on its own. In ten years, Tunisia's young democracy has gained some wrinkles. There are many reasons for this, the most significant being the frustration felt by broad sectors of society with the shortcomings of the various administrations and the widespread idea that the democratic transition has only benefited the powerful. This is not unique to Tunisia. This feeling crosses peoples and cultures, as the American intelligence report *The World in 2035 as seen by the CIA: The Paradox of Progress* has masterfully demonstrated.⁶ Despite everything, Tunisia has shown a strong capacity for resilience. It would suffice for its elites to agree on a recovery plan for the country for the promises of the Spring to be fulfilled.

⁵ See the latest statistics at the Institut National des Statistiques (www.ins.tn)

⁶ US National Intelligence Council. *The World in 2035 as seen by the CIA: The Paradox of Progress*. Global Trends, NIC, January 2017.