



# Foreign Policy Research Institute

## *E-Notes*

*A Catalyst for Ideas*

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### **TUNISIA: EXEMPLAR OR EXCEPTION?**

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The stunningly rapid unfolding of Tunisia's so-called "Jasmine Revolution" left analysts, activists and officials scrambling to make sense of an extremely fluid and uncertain situation. To be sure, matters on the ground appear to have stabilized somewhat, with the establishment of a national unity government led by Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi to manage the transition to the post-Ben Ali era, and the army, headed by General Rachid Ammor, having gained the upper hand over armed groups loyal to the ex-President and apparently responsible for much of the shootings and other assorted acts of violence in recent days. Nonetheless, even as Arab commentators and opposition activists herald the successful popular protest as a historic turning for the country and for the whole region, Tunisia's political future, and the implications for its immediate North African neighbors and the wider Arab world, remains unclear.

Questions about both what ensued and what lies ahead abound: How could the self-immolation suicide of a young man in a provincial town quickly snowball into nation-wide protests calling for the president's removal, and this in a country where all political and civic organizational activity had been utterly cowed for decades? Were the protests entirely "bottom-up", and leaderless? Was Ben Ali's decision to abandon the country simply a failure of nerve, or was he forced out, and if so, by whom? How much cohesion will the political and economic elites demonstrate in the coming months? What are the possibilities for a more genuinely pluralist and democratic political order, one based on a renewed social contract, emerging? Can long-emasculated political parties establish footholds within the country's political and social fabric? Will the Islamist element reemerge as a significant factor, twenty years after being crushed? Will a new Ben Ali emerge to consolidate power, as Ben Ali himself did in 1987 when he engineered a bloodless coup against the country's founder and first president, Habib Bourguiba? And does Ben Ali's downfall mark the beginning of the end for other sclerotic authoritarian Arab regimes? Will the Tunisian events have a domino effect across the region?

Sorting out how things unfolded, however partial and fragmented our knowledge may be at this juncture may help us understand the possible contours of future developments and their implications beyond Tunisia's borders.

There is no little irony in the fact that Tunisia might even be considered a model to emulate by others. After all, throughout 55 years of independence, Tunisia has studiously pursued its own path, in both domestic and foreign affairs, seeking mainly to avoid the embrace of radical and potentially threatening states (Egypt, Libya and Algeria) and political movements (pan-Arabism, Islamism). Moreover, Tunisia's pre-colonial and colonial eras had already laid the groundwork for a compact, well-defined entity which evolved into a relatively homogeneous national state, one with a high degree of legitimacy and collective consciousness. Ernest Gellner put it aptly: Tunisians, he said, seem "comfortable in their own skin." The result was an Arab state unique in many respects. Shortly after attaining independence, polygamy was officially banned (making it unique among Arab governments) and the advancement of women was explicitly promoted ("Liberator of Women" is one of three epitaphs inscribed on the door to Bourguiba's mausoleum); a sizeable and educated middle class emerged in an economy which has a large industrial sector and very limited oil and gas reserves, resulting in the highest level of per capita income among non-oil producing Arab states; in keeping with its long history as a Mediterranean trading entity, it seemed to manage deftly its multiple cultural inputs, European and North African-Islamic.

At the same time, there were considerable shortcomings. Ben Ali had briefly experimented with political pluralism during his first years in power, through a much touted "national pact," but brutally repressed the Islamist current when it showed signs of becoming a significant force. With the middle and wealthier classes petrified that the concurrent violent confrontation between Islamists and the regime next door in Algeria would repeat itself, Ben Ali fashioned a new pact with them: political

stability and economic growth in return for the complete emasculation of the political system and civil society. The formula worked for almost two decades. But against all advice, the regime failed to widen the political and social space, even incrementally, in order to reinforce its legitimacy. Instead it became even more repressive and heavy-handed, fashioning an abysmal record with regard to human rights and freedom of expression. It even required foreign diplomats to have written permission for contact with all official and semi-official Tunisian organizations, and acted to prevent diplomats from maintaining contact with a wide swath of Tunisian society.<sup>1</sup> Repression also had an economic component: reforms did not go far enough in preventing crony capitalism and allowing for a genuinely private sector to emerge, preventing the achievement of growth rates comparable to non-Middle East developing countries or a significant lowering of unemployment rates (14% officially).<sup>2</sup> The apparently exponential increase in the level of corruption, particularly centering on the Tarabelsi family (that of Ben Ali's current wife), deepened the anger and alienation that young Tunisians, especially, felt towards the authorities. The worldwide price rises in basic commodities in 2010 added a new layer of pressure, setting the stage, it turns out, for the Jasmine Revolution.

The initial protests in provincial towns seemed to have a purely socio-economic bent, focusing on unemployment, high food prices and a general sense of frustration and alienation, particularly among the young, who disproportionately suffered from unemployment and a general malaise over their future prospects. At some point, however, the dynamic of protest and repression took on an overtly political dimension, as more and more Tunisians shed their inhibitions and fears and joined in the spreading protests, while the authorities, caught off guard, responded clumsily. Tunisia was not the first country in the region to witness the employment of the new media – Facebook, Twitter, instant messaging, the uploading of cell phone videos to YouTube – for mobilizing political protests. The Egyptian "Kifaya" campaign of 2004-05 first demonstrated its power, while the Iranian "Green" movement took matters to a whole new level in 2009. Although neither achieved their aims, they clearly pointed the way for organizing social and political protests, and Tunisians used them to maximum effect. One should also acknowledge the continuing role of al-Jazeera TV, which broadcast the images of the gathering protests into every Tunisian home, giving them untold weight.

By the time that the protests had reached the capital city, Tunis, a tipping point had apparently been reached. Three times Ben Ali spoke on national television in an effort alternately to condemn the protests (allegedly instigated by foreigners) and offer palliatives ranging from promises for new jobs and enhanced education budgets, to the firings of ministers, to his own commitment not to run for reelection for a fifth term in 2014 and declaring to the public that "I understand you." However, the evidence suggests that the army, which had been called in to restore order, refused to crack down hard on the protests, leaving the work to the police and other security units belonging to the interior ministry. It was at this point, apparently, that Ben Ali decided, perhaps with a nudge from the political and security elite, to spare the country from a major trauma and decamp (to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, which was hardly his first choice: his French ally wanted no part of him).

Now what? Can a new social contract be established between the political and economic elites and the public at large, one which can avoid excessive upheaval and trauma and place Tunisia on the path towards a better future? Already, complaints are being voiced that the newly established unity government is mainly old wine in new bottles, with the changes being only cosmetic, thus constituting a betrayal of the efforts of the protests and the lives lost. Placating this bitterness will be no small task. The coming weeks and months will be crucial for reestablishing order and restoring a measure of legitimacy to the authorities. To that end, the prime minister has promised to end restrictions on the media, free all political prisoners, prepare the ground for free elections, and fashion a Bill of Rights to protect the fundamental rights of all citizens.

Tunisia has always possessed a fair amount of the elements deemed necessary for establishing and maintaining a political system which at least approaches a Western-style democracy: social cohesion, an educated middle class, a legacy of authentic non-governmental civic and professional organizations, such as trade unions and its bar association, a strong tradition of secularism and concern with women's rights, and an absence of grievances and complexes regarding the colonial past and the French language that one finds in neighboring Algeria. At the same time, Tunisian political life has from the outset been dominated by the President, leaving all other political parties and forces emasculated, and the opening up of the political system carries its own risks. The last serious challenge to the political order prior to the Jasmine Revolution came from the Islamist movement. Its leading figure, Rachid Ghannouchi, at one time was considered an Islamic thinker, whose ideas came closer to accepting Western-style democracy and political pluralism than his counterparts elsewhere although one can certainly find others. He has been in exile in Britain for two decades and has declared his intent to return home to participate in the building of a genuine Tunisian democracy, while avoiding explicit references to Islamist ideology. His reticence may be tactical, but also a recognition that a) it is impossible to gauge the degree of current support for an Islamist current; b) there are not-inconsiderable organizational difficulties in reconstituting an Islamist movement; and c) those making the rules for the new political system will be extremely reluctant to enable the Islamists to regain their footing. Of course, excluding an Islamic current entirely from politics carries its own risks: the possible creation of a permanent and attractive opposition pole,

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<sup>1</sup> See the July 17, 2009 US embassy cable made available by Wikileaks: <[www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/217138](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/217138)>

<sup>2</sup> Paul Rivlin, "Tunisia: Unhappy Economic Leader," in *idem*, *Arab Economies in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 266-286.

untainted by the need for compromise or responsibility; pushing Islamic militants into the radical underground; and making it more difficult to achieve genuine democratic legitimacy. In this regard, the Moroccan model of allowing an Islamist party to compete in elections, while requiring acceptance of the constitutional rules of the game, may be worthy of emulation. In any event, the greater the level of political instability, the greater the chance that a new Ben Ali will emerge and reestablish an authoritarian order.

For alienated Arab publics around the region, the success of the Tunisian protests in toppling Ben Ali provided no little admiration and inspiration. Even as they unfolded, a series of similar protests spread across neighboring Algeria, with Jordan experiencing discontent over price hikes as well. Arab pundits were quick to proclaim the heralding of a new era, one in which authoritarian governments could ignore the deep-seated grievances of their publics, especially their youth, only at their own peril. The Jasmine Revolution, it was said, just might eventually trigger democratic transformation the way that Lech Walesa's Solidarity movement triggered the eventual fall of communism in Eastern Europe, particularly if Tunisia's own transition to democracy proves to be meaningful and durable.

All of this may well come to pass. But from this vantage point, Tunisia seems to be more of an exceptional case, rather than an applicable model and a trigger for cascading popular democratic movements elsewhere. Ruling elites in the Maghreb, Egypt and the Arab East were extremely uncomfortable with the sight of popular protests toppling a fellow-member of the club of ruling autocrats. They will surely study the Tunisian experience closely, so as to not fall into the same trap. To that end, Hosni Mubarak's eventual successor in Egypt may seek to reinvigorate the country's political system, to avoid keeping too tight a lid on the social and political pressure cooker. Meanwhile, Tunisia's own elites will be busy managing the competing and complex pressures of maintaining stability, cohesion and their own particular positions, while finding renewed sources for regime legitimacy through increased political pluralism, the rule of law, and policies to ameliorate socio-economic grievances. As with the Jasmine Revolution, this too, will be watched with interest around the region.

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