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## **Tunisia's "Jasmine Revolution," Act II**

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Tunisia's "Jasmine Revolution", which toppled President Zayn al-Abidin Ben 'Ali from power in January, has served as a source of inspiration and emulation for many Middle Eastern societies engaged in their own mass demonstrations against their autocratic rulers. Protestors in Cairo demanding the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak enthusiastically waved the Tunisian flag at various rallies, while speakers at demonstrations in Yemen cheered on Tunisians in their efforts to institute political change. But as the wave of political protests has moved on from Tunisia to other countries, international interest in Tunisia's political upheavals has inevitably waned. For its part, Tunisia has confronted over the past weeks a series of political challenges and lingering questions concerning its future in the aftermath of Ben 'Ali's departure.

The country has now entered the second stage of its revolution, which may prove to be far more complex than the relative ease of organizing mass protests demanding the removal of a detested leader. Although many of the proposed solutions to Tunisia's current political predicament are unique and particular to this North

African country, Tunisia finds itself once again charting a course ahead of the general Arab curve. Among the questions on Tunisia's long list of pressing matters as the country seeks to restore stability, several stand out. These include questions concerning the political system, along with proposals to initiate a process of national reconciliation, which would unite diverse political and social currents; and, finally, a more long-term debate about Tunisia's future profile in a changing regional environment.

The question of the country's political system has been a top priority for Tunisia's political class in recent weeks. Ben 'Ali's abrupt departure and the rapid pace of his regime's demise stunned most political activists, who scrambled to form an interim government which could restore some degree of political stability and draw up plans for the future. One of the negative legacies of Ben 'Ali's rule has been a lack of any viable institutional political alternative to the regime's RCD party. Indeed, most Tunisian opposition parties are weak, locked in internal squabbles among their leadership, and lack any experience in the affairs of government. Unlike Egypt, which has a powerful military that has been involved in politics for decades, Tunisia's military is small and in no position to play a key role in public life. Opposition party leaders presented this reality as the main reason they agreed to join the country's initial interim government, despite the fact that it was largely comprised of Ben 'Ali's former ministers and led by Mohammed Ghannouchi, who served as Ben 'Ali's prime minister. The government set out to restore stability, seeking to signal to the world that Tunisia was "open for business" and that foreign investors and tourists had nothing to fear. It also charted a political course for the country, declaring that free and open parliamentary and presidential elections would be held in six months' time.

Notwithstanding these efforts, the Tunisian public expressed a growing degree of hostility and antagonism towards the interim government throughout February and

early March. Critics were particularly irked by the presence of former Ben 'Ali ministers who continued to hold key cabinet portfolios such as interior, defense, and foreign affairs. Demands for the complete dismantlement of the RCD party were also raised, along with calls to prosecute former officials of the Ben 'Ali regime for corruption, embezzlement, and human rights violations. Protests against the government continued, albeit smaller in size than those which led to Ben 'Ali's downfall. The Tunisian public appears divided between those satisfied with Ben 'Ali's removal from power, and those who seek to prolong the protests in order to achieve broader goals of securing democracy and enhanced civil liberties. Clashes between protestors and security forces raised the specter of lingering domestic unrest. This in turn threatened to undermine the government's efforts to restore order and stability, which has been a guiding principle in Tunisian political culture.

Over the past weeks, the interim government has responded to most of these demands, albeit not immediately. Facing a rising chorus of protest, it removed former Ben 'Ali ministers from their posts, issued arrest warrants for the former president and his family members, and detained his close associates. It also set out to dismantle the RCD party and remove it from the public realm. Bowing to further public pressure, Prime Minister Ghannouchi resigned in late February, noting that he did not wish to hinder the country's move towards a new political horizon. He was replaced by Beji Caid Essebsi, an 84-year-old former associate of Tunisia's founding father and first president, Habib Bourguiba. The new prime minister, unlike his predecessor, was not closely associated with the Ben 'Ali regime, but also unfamiliar to most young Tunisians, indicating that he would indeed serve as a transitional figure only, and would step aside once elections were held. The government's acceptance of most of the public's demands suggests that the current leaders are well aware of the potential for further unrest, and determined above all to restore Tunisia's much touted internal stability. These individuals have also demonstrated

flexibility and willingness to sacrifice their own positions. Such conduct has not been widely emulated in other Arab countries, and once again underscores Tunisia's unique political trajectory.

Early steps towards a degree of national reconciliation reflect the authorities' efforts to address public grievances. A three day period of national mourning in memory of those killed in the riots prior to Ben 'Ali's resignation was declared. They also announced that the government would offer compensation to those whose property was damaged during the riots. Former political prisoners were released from jail, and exiled leaders of political parties were granted permission to return to Tunisia. Among them was Rachid al-Ghannouchi, leader of the Islamist *al-Nahda* (renaissance) movement, who returned from his London exile.

Ghannouchi's return added urgency to a question that had been lingering inside Tunisia and abroad since Ben 'Ali's departure, concerning the role of Tunisia's Islamists. The Islamist movement had been effectively repressed by Ben 'Ali and entirely removed from the public sphere. Ghannouchi, who left the country nearly twenty years ago, has been absent from the political scene. For many young Tunisians, his message may be less relevant and seem out of touch with reality. He acknowledged that he did not see himself as a candidate for any official position, and noted that there were more suitable, younger Islamist leaders. *Al-Nahda* has obtained official recognition from the authorities, and has resurfaced within the political arena. Its activists are visible at anti-government rallies, and its leaders have expressed their interest in joining the interim government and participating in the country's political process. It is difficult to assess the movement's appeal to the Tunisian public. While some traditional elements naturally migrate towards the movement, *al-Nahda* can no longer count on serving as an exclusive opposition force in Tunisia, and will need to recalibrate its message and vision if it wishes to attract

wider support. This will presumably occupy the movement in the coming months as it prepares for an official re-entry to politics.

These developments, and the continuing state of flux, lead one to pose a more long-term question. Many in Tunisia are wrestling with the possible directions in which Tunisian society may evolve – genuine and sustained democratization, a "laundered" Ben 'Ali regime with a less authoritarian character, an Islamist-led government, or an alternative yet to be determined. A number of elements and concepts have long served as the foundation of the country's public life: political stability, moderation, and laws ensuring protecting the status of women. The determined quest of civil liberties has now been added to the list. To what extent will these concepts be integrated into the post-Ben `Ali order, whichever form it takes? These matters will surely bear watching.

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