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# THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF DEMOCRACY IN TUNISIA IS A FEW DAYS AWAY, BUT IS THERE ANYTHING TO CELEBRATE?

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*Zoubeir Souissi/Reuters*

Tunisians went to the polls almost exactly one year ago, in their first and free elections. This was the major outcome of the revolution which culminated in the January 14 overthrow of Ben Ali's regime. The results of those elections were surprising on more than one level, but no one seriously contested them.

The surprise was the sizable number of people who voted for the Ennahda Islamist party and Al-Aridha, an unknown populist party. Even more surprising was the larger number of

those who did not vote (around 52% of eligible voters) at a moment of wide mobilisation and political awareness. There was no outright winner, so coalition rule was the way out, a first in the country's history. When it came to forming the government, Al Aridha was ignored and Ennahdha, the biggest but not outright winner allied itself with CPR and Attakattol, two parties known for their secular leanings.

A Constitutional Assembly was sworn in and a

strong opposition emerged within the Assembly and more so outside of it. This opposition included a reinvigorated civil society, including the powerful labour union, UGTT and several parties not represented in the Assembly. All indications were that the country was set for a smooth transition of power but a rough ride at the political level in the long run. At the social level, huge expectations were reinvigorated by the opening up of the field of contestation and newly found freedoms. This was further amplified by a whole host of unreasonable electoral promises.

At the cultural level, the most visible phenomenon has been the freedom to dress and behave in the public sphere as one saw fit. The hitherto banned hijab (head scarf) became more conspicuous, niqab (full veil) became part of the landscape and beards were no longer banned. This was on the conservative side. On the liberal side, it was in the arts mostly that the new freedoms were expressed: daring paintings, public art, film and music and a lot of political humour. One could say that the country witnessed an unprecedented diversity taking over its public space, which was a sign of deeper rifts that needed to be accommodated by all parties. This, of course has not always been the case, hence the lamentable attacks on artists and art for example, and bitter conflicts on university campuses over dress code.

Today, Tunisia stands fragmented politically, although much less than a year ago. Its economy is struggling and its social protests remain unabated. This may sound dire, but given the drastic change and loss of central power and perception of it, things are not as bad as they could have been. This is largely due to historical factors in the country, including the strength of the state, well ordered administration, a neutral army and a very strong labour movement. But the weakening of central power and the opening up of the system to completely new forces, such as the Ennahda party, has been accompanied by some

major risks and temptations. To understand the depth of the current crisis, one needs to know that the mandate of the Constituent Assembly stated "a maximum of one year" as a the period within which a Constitution should be written and new elections held, based on such a constitution. Today, a few days before that deadline, the said constitution has not been completed, and no elections are in sight.

This has made October 23, 2012 sound sometimes like a date with the apocalypse, when all order is going to cave in and an illegitimate government will rule the country. This date and the grim prospects has become a rallying cry for opposition parties and the labour union. As a result, coalitions have rapidly formed themselves, most notable of which has been the Popular Front which gathers key leftist and nationalist parties together with Nidaa Tounis, led by the popular former Prime Minister, al Baji Qaid al-Sibsi, which situates itself in the middle of the political spectrum.

In fact the middle way of politics has emerged as the privileged space for politics in Tunisia, rather a surprise considering that the country is meant to be going through a revolutionary phase. Indeed, this says quite a lot about the type of revolution this has been. Ennahda now has Nidaa Tounes in its sights, specifically because it has emerged as the most appealing grouping for a liberal, moderate middle class, the same base that Ennahda was hoping to attract. Nidaa also projects the same image that Ennahda has tried to project to American and European allies, eager to be seen to allow 'moderate' Islamists to rule these rebellious societies (Tunisia and Egypt in particular).

Ennahda opponents suspect that it has been trying to get a permanent grip on the main institutions of the state by appointing loyal people in high positions in the administration (ambassadors, CEOs, local governors etc). They also accuse Ennahda of making long-term economic plans, something which does not chime with the one year mandate. These

moves were understood as a plan to determine the outcome of this transitional period in Ennahda's favour, and inevitably this has increased tensions, polarization and mistrust.

### SOME CLEAR GAINS

In the same way that the revolution produced unlikely beneficiaries (the most important of which are the Islamists, powerful business and the upper middle class), it created the context for corrective action as well as possibilities and agents of change. One of these has been the media, which is part of a wider climate of assertive freedom. This can be summarized in two significant events and one key observation.

Under the pretext that the national television has not changed enough and remains in the hands of the supporters of the old ruling party, a grouping of various Islamist tendencies organized a protracted sit-in at its headquarters. It was vigorous, even violent at times. But it came to very little. The television, supported by the unions and opposition parties, resisted and kept its commitment to being a public broadcaster. As a result, and for the first time in the Arab world, the national state-owned television has become supported by the people, the most watched channel. It continues to be so today, attracting some four million views nightly, despite serious competition and a profound change of leadership. The same can be said of radio. Public media in Tunisia is now decidedly public, not governmental, in its orientation.

The other event is the on-going dispute between the semi-public newspaper al Sabah, the oldest running independent daily in Tunisia, and its director who was appointed by the government and rejected by the journalists and staff. The latter's sit-in has been going on for almost two months; and it has galvanized opposition against the government and become emblematic of the "battle over the freedom of the press" and an icon of the determination to preserve it.

These developments are related to the almost complete eclipse of al Jazeera from Tunisian viewing public, except perhaps for al Jazeera Sport. This is very significant and is indicative of a wider issue pertinent to the Arab Spring as a whole. The channel which dominated Tunisian screens for years and championed their revolution has emerged, from a few months after the revolution in fact, as a force now regarded as almost a public enemy. Its journalists have been made to feel unwelcome and have even experienced aggression in rallies and demonstrations simply because Al Jazeera was closely associated with Qatar and with Ennahda, and both were suffering from a backlash effect.

### BLUNDERS AND REVELATIONS

One of the defining moments in the past year has been the attack on the US embassy in Tunis. This laid bare the inability of the security forces to protect foreign embassies, despite the fact that they knew of the planned demonstration. Some believe the police were in collusion with demonstrators and implicitly encouraged them perhaps in a test of strength or to appease Salafists keen on protesting against the American film which insulted the Prophet Muhammad. The outcome was the looting of the American School, burning the car park and the death of three Tunisians at the hands of the police, in addition to many injured, particularly among the security forces.

More importantly, the incident put the government in the hot seat with the local opposition, as well as with the United States. Some believe it has led to a complete rethink of American support for Ennahda. The government had to do something to control Salafis and show it was the moderate, law-respecting movement it claimed to be. This was effected through the arrest of some figures and meetings of the Foreign Minister and the President with US officials. Apparently this was only the visible side of Ennahda's damage

limitation exercise though. A leaked video featuring Ghannouchi, the party president, in conversation with Salafi leaders, whose authenticity was accepted by him, seems to have revealed a side of the leader that many have feared all along. It has been used to show how the Salafis were part of Ennahda's strategy, and to suggest that the two movements agree on the ultimate goal of the re-Islamicisation of the people and the institutions, such as the army, the police and the media. This is how Reuters reported the event:

"Secularists still control the economy, the media and the administration ... the army and police also is not guaranteed," Ghannouchi said in the meeting with Salafi leaders, during which he advised them to be patient about gaining more control. "Now we have not just a few mosques, we have the Ministry of Religious Affairs ... I invite you to do what you can with religious lessons and launch radio, television and schools." He said Islamists should focus on social gains and learn from neighbouring Algeria, where an Islamist party won an election in 1992 only for the army to cancel the vote. "The Islamists should use the popular associations, establish Koranic schools everywhere and appeal for more religious preachers because people are still ignorant of Islam," he said.

Rachid Ghannouchi tried to explain his statements on national television the following day. But a major change of opinion was under way as more people thought this confirmed the double-faced discourse of Ennahda and their

Islamist allies. The international media has seized on the video and Ennahda has been on the back foot ever since this blunder in their progress was made.

## CONCLUSION

It is within this atmosphere, then, that Tunisia faces the first anniversary of its democratic elections. The end of the electoral legitimacy of the Assembly is upon us, and the scramble to avoid a collision is frantically underway, most notably by UGTT, which is playing there role of power broker and mediator. Things can easily veer towards open conflict, perhaps even a violent one, now that the Popular Front and Nidaa Tounes and its allies have structured themselves. But Annahda is clearly no longer in control of all things in Tunisia. The stakes for the country are very high, and so are the stakes for those who banked on Islamists as a credible democratic alternative in the countries of the Arab Spring. Meanwhile, central causes of the revolution, namely unemployment and severe regional imbalance in development, remain largely unattended to. They continue to constitute a major grievance as well as an element of mobilization for continued protests, particularly in the regions concerned. Threats to gains in women rights and to freedom of creativity have galvanized women and "modernist" intellectuals. The first anniversary may be marked in ways which could be as surprising as the Tunisian revolution itself was. ❀