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Tunisia Leads the Way Again

Post-election Power Constellation Promising for Democratisation

Isabelle Werenfels

The electoral success of the moderate Islamist Ennahda will do no harm to the chances of successful democratisation in Tunisia. Quite the contrary in fact: the new situation is favourable, because Ennahda will take on the responsibility of government without being able to rule alone. The emerging coalition of left-wing and Islamist parties will enjoy broad acceptance in the population. They will need it too, if they are to revive a flagging economy and sweep out the cobwebs from the former regime's state apparatus. Parliamentary elections are likely to be held within the year, so Ennahda and its coalition partners will be eager to demonstrate a good economic and political track record by that date. Europe should continue to support the democratisation process with money, expertise and deeper cooperation, but above all by demonstrating trust and patience.

The elections for the Tunisian constituent assembly on 23 October 2011 were strikingly successful. National and international observers certified that the voting had been remarkably well-organised and the results by and large free and fair with only isolated irregularities. The outcome itself, too, is likely to further the democratisation process.

While about eighty parties stood candidates, the assembly is not fragmented. Nineteen parties, eight independent lists and one joint list are represented, but the majority of seats went to just a handful of parties, which together cover almost the complete political spectrum.

The election victor, the Islamist Ennahda (Arabic for "renaissance"), won 89 of the

217 seats, followed by two left-wing parties, the Congress for the Republic (CPR, 29 seats) and Ettakatol (20 seats). Decidedly secular and liberal forces are also present with about thirty seats, including two parties regarded as rallying points for supporters of the old system. Although the Popular Petition, in a big surprise, won 26 seats, a number of elected members have already split from the party, and its leader, a former Islamist who developed close ties to the Ben Ali regime, is looked upon with suspicion by the other parties.

The Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), an opposition party under Ben Ali, had been running in second place in the opinion polls, but ended up with just 17 seats. It was punished by voters for flagrantly

flouting the rules on political advertising during the campaign. Many Tunisians were also put off by the PDP's support from France, the United States and the business elites of the old regime.

The parties that did best, Ennahda, CPR and Ettakatol, are those whose opposition to and distance from the Ben Ali regime stood in least doubt. The legitimacy of the new executive, chosen by the assembly and made up of these three parties, will be correspondingly strong. Tunisia's new prime minister, Hamadi Jebali, comes from Ennahda, the country's new president, Moncef Marzouki, from the CPR, and the assembly will be headed by Ettakatol's Mustapha Ben Jaafar.

At home and abroad, these political figures and parties will have the chance to be judged by their deeds for the first time. This applies especially to Ennahda, which will enjoy decisive influence over the direction of this phase of the democratisation process, but without being able to dictate developments on its own. If Ennahda sought to shift the line between religion and politics, as some secular forces accuse it of wanting to do, it could not impose such changes alone. A case in point was the harsh reactions of its coalition partners to Hamadi Jebali's ambiguous reference to a new caliphate. Following these reactions, and an outcry in the Tunisian media, Ennahda again explicitly reaffirmed its adherence to a republican democratic system that derives its legitimacy exclusively from the people.

The Next Stages

The next step of the Tunisian democratisation is to draft a new constitution, after which parliamentary, local and presidential elections are planned. When and in what order remains unclear for the time being. What the main parties have settled on is that the constituent assembly should last for a year.

One advantage of this sequence is that while the election of 23 October tested the

water, the losers will soon get a second chance and therefore have little interest in impeding the process. The flip side is that the transition will drag on, leaving the country in a permanent election campaign. It will gain a legitimised executive, but one whose members will already have one eye on the next elections. Of course the new government will be interested in tackling problems vigorously, but its hands will be tied by a reluctance to take unpopular decisions.

Disputes and Dilemmas

The discussion about the new constitution is likely to revolve around a handful of central questions: the type of political system (presidential, parliamentary or a hybrid form), the definition of national identity, the role of religion in the state, and gender equality. As far as women's rights are concerned, Tunisia has been a forerunner in the Arab world for decades. By law electoral lists had to be half female, and 24 percent of the members of the constituent assembly are women. Ennahda, as election victor, favours a parliamentary system so a purely presidential system is probably off the table (a mixed system favoured by other parties could still be in the running). As far as national identity and the role of religion in the state are concerned, it is looking likely that Article 1 of the old constitution will be retained, stating that Tunisia's religion is Islam and its language Arabic. The secularist forces that would like to banish Islam from the constitution are too weak to prevail, and the same may well apply to the emerging Berber movement that would like to add a "Berber dimension" to the official Arab Muslim identity. The clause guaranteeing freedom of religion (Article 5) also looks safe, given that it has Ennahda's support.

However, although the moderate Islamists adopt a liberal stance on alcohol and the headscarf they find themselves in a political dilemma over these issues. Ennahda presents itself as the Tunisian

counterpart to Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party. But if it acts accordingly it will alienate the less moderate Islamist spectrum, leaving the field of opposition and moral oversight to more radical forces like the Salafists, and risk losing votes.

Nonetheless there is little to suggest that Ennahda is abandoning its liberal course. Ultimately, setting it apart from other Islamist actors in the Arab world, it has been heavily influenced by the social modernisation project of Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba. And more broadly, Ennahda is a product of Tunisia's traditionally strongly consensus-oriented political culture.

This current of harmony and unity combined with an ethic of precision and meticulousness in Tunisia's elite and administration contributed decisively to the success of the first free elections. In view of the weakness of the state and the absence of a "strong leader" after the fall of Ben Ali, that success was not automatic. Together with the high level of education and the veritable explosion of civil society activity these are promising preconditions for democratisation.

Challenges and Dangers

For all justifiable optimism, the challenges and dangers should not be forgotten. The transitional government faces enormous economic and structural problems.

Firstly, it must find its way out of the economic crisis into which Tunisia has fallen since the departure of Ben Ali. After a serious downturn in investment and production and a 50 percent fall in tourism, growth for 2011 is forecast to be zero. Unemployment, which was one of the main sources of the unrest that sparked the Jasmine Revolution, has increased by 3 percentage points over 2010.

The medium-term perspectives are not bad: the pre-election transitional government has instituted growth and employment programmes, and 3.9 percent growth

is forecast for 2012. But tension remains between high popular expectations and economic perspectives that are likely to improve only slowly. Ennahda campaigned on promises of 7 percent growth and 590,000 new jobs by 2016, without saying precisely how it intends to make that happen. Just like the transitional governments of 2011 it could quickly find itself confronted with massive strikes and demonstrations, leading to further economic setbacks. The rise of radical and populist forces is also a real danger. If democratisation is to succeed the upturn needs to come soon.

Secondly, the new political elites will need to tackle economic, social and political imbalances. Regional redress is the most urgent concern, in terms of political representation as well as socio-economic development. The province of Sidi Bouzid, for example, has not supplied a single minister since independence. Another sensitive point is the lack of political representation for young Tunisians. The successful parties are still controlled by the older generation, while younger activists were either given places far down the party lists or, like many of the bloggers who played such a driving role in the uprising, were unable to identify with the established parties and stood instead on independent lists with little chance of success.

Thirdly, the country still has before it a conflict with Ben Ali's cronies and a bureaucracy where the habits and structures of the old regime are still widespread. So far, change in the justice system and the police, as well as the universities and media, has affected only the top positions, if at all. Many Tunisians wish for old leaders and arrangements to be rooted out more vigorously, also in the private sector. Here the right balance will have to be found between too much rigour and too much lenience in prosecuting the "old forces".

Not least, the new government must restore law and order. The weakness of the state since the fall of Ben Ali has led in

the interior and the south to criminality, lawlessness, and tribal tensions in some cases stoked by forces tied to the old regime. While the role played by weapons and militant groups from Algeria and Libya remains unclear, it is plain that Tunisia urgently requires cooperation with these neighbours. But Libya stands at the very beginning of a difficult state-building process, while Algeria's own domestic political situation gives it little interest in the success of Tunisian democratisation.

Europe Needs Patience

The EU and especially Germany should unreservedly maintain their explicit support for the transition process in Tunisia. A series of fundamental points need to be noted.

Firstly, existing imbalances should not be exacerbated. Projects and investment should concentrate on the less privileged regions of the south and interior, rather than Tunis and other coastal cities as has been the case to date. Europe could encourage the Tunisian government to decentralise its agencies.

Secondly, mobility has exceptional symbolic importance. If the EU could bring itself to grant work visas to fifty thousand university-educated Tunisians every year that might not have any great economic impact, but it would open up perspectives for young Tunisians and signalise that democratisation is worthwhile.

Thirdly, it is sensible to make financial aid and closer ties with Europe contingent on Tunisia sticking to the course of democratisation. France has set a poor example here, declaring conditions for cooperation before the official results had even been announced. That was an affront not only to Ennahda, but to all Tunisian voters.

Fourthly, after successfully completing the first phase of the transition with free and fair elections, Tunisia needs and deserves Europe's trust. Ennahda should be given the same benefit of the doubt as any secular election winner and judged

primarily on its actions. Speculation about a hidden agenda should not be a basis for EU policies.

Fifthly, the European Union will need to be patient. Democratisation processes, as we have seen in Latin America, may take more than a decade, and experience setbacks along the way. Tunisia has no strong external incentive akin to the perspective of EU membership for the states of eastern and central Europe. Instead it will wish to, and indeed must, make its own decisions about the programme and speed of reforms. But it will be well worth the while for the EU to continue to invest in Tunisia's transition process. Of all the states in the region Tunisia has the best prospects of developing into a stable democracy within the next decade. Although differences in structural preconditions mean that success in Tunisia cannot be applied directly to other Arab states, the Tunisian transition represents a very important model and inspiration for populations across the Arab world.

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