



# Can the Tunisian revolution be reversed?

by Gilles Bertrand

Two years after the revolution, the Tunisian transition needs a new momentum. The inexperience and lack of tactical acumen displayed in recent months by the political class – Ennahda, its coalition partners and the opposition alike – has cast doubt on their collective ability to fulfil the mandate given to them by the people. The assassination on 6 February of Chokri Belaid, a leading human rights advocate and left-wing political figure, has shocked the country deeply and triggered a governmental crisis that had been simmering for several months. The unprecedented popular mobilisation that surrounded his funeral demonstrated yet again the Tunisian people's determination to continue on the path towards change.

Concerns about identity and Islam did not feature among the root causes and the events that triggered the revolution. The vast majority of Tunisians concurs on the vision of a social and democratic state embedded in a modern and tolerant Islam: they simply want to see rhetoric turned into reality. The first discussions in the Constituent Assembly reiterated this national consensus, by renewing Article 1 of the previous Constitution and rejecting attempts to dilute the *Code du statut personnel* and delineate the role of women in society.

Despite renewed concerns about Ennahda's commitment to democracy and legitimate worries about

the escalation of security incidents, most of them caused by a minority of violent extremist Islamists, Tunisians remain acutely aware that the solutions to their country's problems lie elsewhere than in endless discussions about secularism and Islamist ideologies. Their demands remain essentially the same as in January 2011: democracy, economic dignity, and freedom.

## Democracy:

Freedom of speech is unquestionably the most obvious achievement of the last two years. Tunisia has experienced a sea change compared with the repressive regime of the past. Despite inevitable growing pains and an increase in personal attacks and insults, the media are making progress at establishing a space of debate and dialogue.

The country remains badly in need, however, of independent institutions that can act as counterweights to the government. The judiciary is not independent. There are no elected local authorities. Unions and other representative bodies, with a few rare exceptions, were traditionally weak and infiltrated by the regime and the ruling party. Successful transition processes require establishing independent authorities to deal with some of the most important issues: while this was successfully done for elections, it remains to be undertaken for transitional justice.

## Economic dignity:

While the Tunisian economy is generally considered to be strong and resilient, it has been weakened by the global economic slowdown and by persistent internal political instability. Beyond Tunisia's relatively solid macroeconomic indicators, management of the country's economy has traditionally followed top-down approaches favouring export-driven manufacturing, big business, centrally-decided geographic specialisations and economic development in the coastal regions — at the expense of the domestic market, small entrepreneurs, local development, and the south and east of the country.

Tunisia needs a mix of legal, economic and tax reforms to strengthen its competitiveness and do away with the niches carved out by the former regime to divert the country's wealth to the benefit of President Ben Ali and his wife's extended clans and their business partners. However, if it wants to address the strong popular demand for economic dignity and social justice, it needs first and foremost to design bottom-up approaches in order to make growth more inclusive and empower the weakest and most frustrated actors of the economy, especially the regions and the unemployed youth.

This could be achieved by fostering local development plans, training and supporting local entrepreneurs, diversifying economic activities in the regions, increasing the reliance on small businesses, and designing strategies to exploit potential trade and business synergies with Libya and Algeria to the benefit of bordering regions.

## Freedom

The interior ministry was the backbone of the two dictatorships that Tunisia has endured since independence. Its structures and practices are primarily geared towards enforcing the power of the state over its citizens. Its tasks are manifold and range from public order and investigation to managing local authorities, organising elections, conducting extensive internal intelligence and other secret activities.

Reforming the interior ministry is possibly the most pressing task ahead for Tunisia's democracy.

Not only is it a precondition for restoring order and public confidence in the Tunisian police: it is also a necessary step to build confidence within the political class. Ben Ali was only able to overthrow Habib Bourguiba in 1987 because he had full control over the

ministry of interior. As long as it remains as it stands, controlling it will therefore continue to be

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an imperative concern for all political actors. The reform should be well underway before the next election to preclude a situation where the winners might be tempted to reverse the process.

## Still a potential success story

Tunisia still has in its hands most of the cards necessary for a successful political transition. It can build, in particular, on the competence of its bureaucracy and on the large consensus on change within its population. Instead of embarking immediately on another electoral process, an agreement across the parties to move forward on the substance, under the leadership of a government acceptable to all, could prove a better way to address popular impatience and achieve progress on the key demands of the revolution. By giving more time to the political parties to clarify their programmes, it could also save the country from a scenario of chronic political instability. Whether such national unity is achievable is, however, open to question.

Irrespective of the timing of the elections, Tunisia's bureaucratic, economic and political élite must now respond to the determination and the compelling demands of their people. It is imperative that they place the future of the country and its citizens above other dogmatic or party political considerations. They must keep at bay the small minority that nurtures the dream of establishing an Islamist regime by force. And launch, without further delay, the substantial reforms that will allow Tunisia to close the chapter of the old regime.

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