

The Radical Change of the Tunisian Peaceful Revolution

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Brief Analysis



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As the birthplace of the Arab Spring, Tunisia has proven to be an oddity. While other Arab Spring countries have experienced varying levels of war, mayhem, and authoritarian crack-downs, Tunisia has remained on a path of peaceful change. The absence of violence, however, should not be mistaken for a return to the status quo. Tunisia continues, instead, to experience a deep and meaningful revolution.

A revolution can be understood as radical transformative change as well as a radical regime change. The impact of a revolution reaches both emotions and reality. Emotions, however, tend to outlive reality. While history records facts and events, people usually see events through their emotions. Reality is remembered through the prism of the struggle towards freedom and human dignity. All the hardships, atrocities, and bloodshed, it is argued, are thus justified and redeemed.

Most of the time, revolutions are branded as a legitimate expression of violence. However, branding revolutions as a legitimate use of violence is, in reality, masking the elite's failure to bring about such a radical change through peaceful means.

So far, Tunisia has presented the counter-example of a peaceful revolution. Can it bring about a radical change?

It is fair to question whether the Arab Spring is anything beyond a romanticizing of dramatically different events. While it started in Tunisia, once it spread to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, it quickly turned violent— except in Tunisia.

So what had happened in Tunisia and what has kept it so peaceful? And why will it remain peaceful?

In Tunisia, there is a long and peaceful, still radical, process of change; not only a change of regime, but also one of the sociopolitical system.

The Ennahdha Party can be considered one of the main driving forces behind these changes. Rachid Ghannoushi, the leader of Ennahdha Party, has been the charismatic figure pushing towards the accomplishment of the proposed changes, all within the spirit of compromise.

Ghannoushi's call for compromise has ushered the formation of coalition governments between Islamists and

secularist parties. Ennahdha, therefore, fought the temptation of building a coalition government with a party which had grounded itself in Islam.

Ghannouchi also insisted that the constitution should reflect the general consensus between the different social and political factions of the society, hence opting against considering Sharia law as a source of the constitution. This was a dynamic process in which Ennahda started by internally discussing Islamic jurisprudence as a source. Faced with the concerns of some fellow Tunisians, Ennahda abandoned this path, in the true spirit of national consensus.

Ennahda also objected and helped defeat the so-called “safeguarding of the revolution” law. Such a law would have denied those who worked with the previous regime from their rights to participation in the political life. Ghannouchi considers that such a collective punishment law contradicts justice and the ethics of Islam.

Ennahda was a key positive participant in the national dialogue process. It voluntarily allowed the resignation of the government, and participated in the formation of an independent government, therefore paving the way towards the completion of the constitution and then the democratic elections. The role of civil society in reaching a peaceful resolution has earned the “Quartet” of civil society actors the Nobel Peace Prize. The proactive dynamism of civil society was in line with the sense of civic duty demonstrated by Ennahda and its political rivals. The priority for all is this deep sense of democracy that has guided the process.

Finally, Ennahda has participated in a coalition government with the opposing political party.

Not only did the Tunisian revolution bring about a change within the regime, it also brought about a change within the social political system and a change in the rules of the political game.

One may argue and say that Tunisia’s revolution has reformed the country, rather than radically changed it, especially when people and the old faces of the regime are not only still active within the political scene but have come back to lead the political scene.

It is exactly because of this scene, though, that one may say that a radical change has occurred in the first place, and that such a scene has caused the Tunisian revolution and its spring to have survived the winter storms of the neighborhood.

So in which way may one speak about change in Tunisia?

First, it is true that many of the current leaders of the political scene in Tunisia used to belong to the old regime. Regardless, they did not come to power according to the old system, and they are not governing according to the rules of the old regime.

It is surely true that people leading a political regime are important. However, the system usually has more impact on the public and private sphere. What can be described as a good or a bad system can, accordingly, influence every condition of the state.

Those who are governing Tunisia today came to power as a result of democratic elections; hence, they represent the free will of the people of Tunisia, irrespective of their ideology.

It is this deep sense of democracy that has guided the process. A recurring slogan of Ghannouchi during the electoral campaign was that “the public servant who enters the door of the constitution is the legitimate child of the revolution.” Ghannouchi describes himself as a “Muslim Democrat,” not an Islamist. As such, Ennahda is radically different from the movements categorized as “political Islam.”

As a Muslim Democrat, Ghannouchi refers to the example of the Prophet of Islam with a new focus. Upon entering Makkah as a conqueror, the Prophet had declared that he who enters the house of Abu Sufyan is safe. Abu Sufyan was the leader of Quraysh, the tribe which had governed other Arab tribes, and was the main opponent of the

Prophet of Islam.

The idea is that the Prophet of Islam did not try to take revenge; he instead made sure that even his sworn enemies came under the rule of the emerging authority, irrespective of their faith. What mattered first was the establishment of a stable political regime and social system.

Through such models, Ghannouchi and Ennahdha made a radical impact in changing the political system of Tunisia.

In fact, Tunisia moved from a centralized power system, which was founded on one party rule and a government that is ruled by the sole authority of the person of the president of the republic, to a multi-party system that is based on the separation of powers, in which the parliament plays a major role, and local and regional government are building their local authority system.

However the main radical change that happened in Tunisia consists in the fact that the political life is no longer based on ideology. The struggle is to strengthen the fight for citizenship and the right of the individuals in freedom and dignity, such a struggle is the shared focus of different political parties. That is why Ghannouchi and his party have decided to reject the banner of Islamism and political Islam. Indeed, it was after more than two years of internal debate at the tenth conference of Ennahdha that the party had opted to this orientation, termed “specialization.”

“Specialization” means that Ennahdha restricts its participation within the public sphere to political concerns. All other issues – social, cultural, and religious – would be the domain of other social and civil actors whether they be individual or within groups.

Ghannouchi believes that the Tunisian revolution not only has ended the reign of a totalitarian regime, but it has also ended the social need for a totalitarian movement.

The real challenge, which still faces Tunisia, is not the conflict between Islam and secularism. Instead, it is rather a challenge between those striving to deepen the change that was sparked by the revolution, and those who consider that the outcome of revolution is not in their benefit, and therefore, strive to revive old wounds. ❖

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