Tunisia's Post-Revolution Blues

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Articles & Testimony

Stagnation and stalemate continue to plague the country where the Arab Spring began.

At least Tunisia is not as bad as Egypt -- that is the hardly comforting good news coming out of the country where the Arab Spring began more than two years ago. The bad news is that Tunisia has come up far short of the lofty expectations set by Tunisians and outsiders in January 2011, when protests finally forced President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali from office. Among the Middle East's post-revolutionary governments, Tunisia still has the best chance of turning into a consolidated democracy, but barriers old and new are making the task far more difficult.

As I discovered during a recent research trip, Tunisians are deeply worried about their country's sluggish economy, worsening security situation, and never-ending political stalemate. The protests that began the revolution centered on the lack of job opportunities, and Tunisians at all levels of society are still demanding economic improvement. Now, however, they are increasingly fearful for their own safety, the assassination of the popular left-leaning and secular politician Chokri Belaid being just the latest cause for concern, and they are growing disillusioned with the country's acute political polarization. Together, the lack of progress on these fronts has left once hopeful observers worrying that if Tunisia, a small, educated, and religiously and ethnically homogenous country, is having so much trouble with its transition, then perhaps every other Arab Spring country is doomed, too.

On the economic front, Moody's and the S&P have both downgraded their assessments of Tunisia's economy in recent weeks; the country's bond rating is now officially at junk status. Tourism, once a main source of income, has not rebounded since the revolution; I was traveling in the off-season, but even so, I was struck by how few European tourists there were in Tunis and Sousse. The age-old economic gap between the coastal regions and the interior continues to grow, a divide that Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, the Islamist group believed to be behind the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis last September, is exploiting through its own social welfare programs.

Moreover, according to one U.S. diplomat I spoke with, Tunisia's business climate is far from welcoming. The

government's protectionist rules against franchises have discouraged foreign companies, including American ones, from entering the Tunisian market, reducing the prospects for employment even further. A loan from the International Monetary Fund, currently under negotiation, would help alleviate some of the pain and start Tunisia down the path of economic reform. But the IMF has held back, announcing in February, "Once the political situation is clarified, we'll assess how best to help Tunisia."

Progress has also been hampered by the lack of any major economic legislation. The Constituent Assembly, the legislature in charge of creating a new constitution, and Ennahda, the Islamist party that leads the assembly, seem to be plodding along. For months, the government has been discussing long-overdue structural reforms, such as fixing the country's outdated investment and labor codes, but so far there is no legislation to show for it. An IMF reform package may help someday, but things surely would be better had the government not waited 18 months to start the process.

One challenge the Tunisian state will have to deal with is that the number of university-educated graduates exceeds the number of available jobs. When I spoke with a former official in the Ben Ali regime, he explained that the problem dates back to the proliferation of universities during the 1980s. Every year, 70,000 students graduated from college, competing for only 30,000 positions. Over time, frustration among educated yet unemployed young people built up, culminating in the December 2010 protests. That frustration has not disappeared, with youth unemployment among college graduates, according to the National Institute of Statistics, at over 33 percent.

The security situation in Tunisia has also deteriorated. I landed in Tunis a week after Belaid's assassination -- the first high-profile killing in the country's history -- so an atmosphere of insecurity still permeated the air. In a sense, the murder exemplified the insecurity that Tunisians have faced since the revolution.

Part of the problem is that the government has failed to reform its security service. The Ministry of Interior, which houses the police and national guard, now consists of three factions: one loyal to Ben Ali, one loyal to Ennahda, and one loyal to no one. The competing interests have left the ministry in disarray, and it has failed to enforce security as a result. Radwan Masmoudi, the president of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy in Tunis, told me that the ministry had to be completely rebuilt, within the confines of respecting human rights and the rule of law. "Security is the first condition for real and sustained economic and political progress," he said, "especially in a country where over 400,000 people work in the tourism industry."

Even as it has done little to improve security, the Ministry of Interior has also been accused of victimizing innocent civilians. Left-of-center Tunisians told me that when Islamist demonstrations break out, the police protect the protesters, whereas when secularists or liberals hold protests, the police attack them with tear gas. Members of Ansar al-Sharia, for their part, complained to me that employees of the Ministry of Interior are breaking into their homes and mosques, destroying possessions and making arbitrary arrests.

Tunisia's politicians have done little to address these issues, partially because they are still busy drafting a constitution, which was originally supposed to be finished in October 2012. Elections should be held six months after the constitution is completed. When they are, security will be a major campaign issue, according to Sonia Karma, a senior leader with the main secular opposition party, Nida Tunis, which includes some former regime officials. But it is hard to see how the law-and-order approach will provide much of an advantage come campaign season, since the movement is still very coastal, urban, and elite.

Regardless, if the current political climate is any guide, the campaign will feature ample mudslinging. Nida Tunis and Ennahda are the two biggest parties, and both have used toxic language to denigrate each other, with Nida Tunis calling the Islamists "rats" and Ennahda labeling its secular opponents "snakes." In this zero-sum game, each side believes that it can eliminate the other. As one liberal activist, unaffiliated with any political party, put it to me,

political progress will occur only when each faction accepts that the others are not going away. "Dialogue and respect is the only approach," he said.

As Tunisia sorts out its politics, Ennahda is also struggling to figure out what type of party it will become. Last February, in a move that revealed the divide between Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali and the rest of Ennahda, Jebali resigned after the party rejected his attempt to install a technocratic government as a way of resolving the political impasse. Jebali's son-in-law, Mahmoud Kammoun, told me that Ennahda will have to follow the path that Turkey's Justice and Development Party, the AKP, has taken: embracing Islamism but respecting democratic principles. Veering any further to the right, he said, would be catastrophic for Tunisia, since it could lead to a government that curtailed freedom of expression and the rights of women and minorities.

The possibility of such a rightward drift stokes fears among Tunisia's left. But Ennahda has its own legitimate fears. Suppressed during the Ben Ali era, the party sees Nida Tunis as attempting to revive the old regime and once again suppress the Islamists. Both parties have valid concerns, and the deep differences between them represent one reason that the constitution has yet to be completed and the next election has yet to be scheduled.

What unites the Tunisian politicians and activists I spoke to across the political spectrum is concern about their country's prospects if the parties can't agree on a constitution. As both Masmoudi and Kammoun warned, if the democratic project fails, the only solution left for people to turn to would be the sharia option. In other words, political dysfunction could create more room for puritanical groups, such as Ansar al-Sharia, that operate outside the political process. Over the last two years, Ansar al-Sharia has grown rapidly thanks to its strategy of demonstrating, albeit on a limited scale, that unlike Tunisia's politicians, it can actually provide people with food, medicine, and security.

According to a Pew poll released last summer, only 23 percent of Tunisians want their country's laws to strictly follow the Koran, and the shared fear of sharia among the rest of the population could well compel a political compromise. In that case, Tunisia could move on to the next phase of its transition, conducting another election and attempting to solve its economic crisis. Otherwise, the current political impasse and general feelings of instability could become the new normal.

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