

# Tunisia As the Test Case for U.S. Resolve on Arab Reform

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## Brief Analysis

**T**oday's meeting between President George W. Bush and visiting Tunisian president Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali may be a low-profile event with a leader of a country in which the United States has only limited strategic interests. Yet, the repercussions of their luncheon tete-a-tete for the administration's larger objective of Arab political reform could be profound. Invitations to meet with the president in Washington are a rare privilege -- Ben Ali has not been there in fourteen years and is only the sixth Arab head of state that Bush has received there (joining the leaders of Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, and Yemen). Given that there are no burning issues on the bilateral U.S.-Tunisian agenda, the principal question regarding this visit is whether Bush will use the occasion to press a visiting Arab leader on his ambitious plan for Arab political reform.

### Bush's Middle East Reform Initiative

The Bush administration has become increasingly blunt in emphasizing the need for political change in the Middle East. In December 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell introduced the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the administration's program to encourage economic, political, and educational reform in the region. Similarly, President Bush's November 6, 2003, speech at the National Endowment for Democracy called for a "forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East." Two weeks later, in a speech at Whitehall Palace in London, Bush ranked "our commitment to the global expansion of democracy" as a cornerstone of his approach to global affairs, alongside a willingness to restrain aggression with force and a dedication to working with other responsible governments. Bush was especially blunt about the need to "shake off decades of failed policy in the Middle East":

"Your nation [Britain] and mine, in the past, have been willing to make a bargain, to tolerate oppression for the sake of stability. Longstanding ties often led us to overlook the faults of local elites. Yet, this bargain did not bring stability or make us safe. It merely bought time, while problems festered and ideologies of violence took hold."

As the president alluded to in his 2004 State of the Union speech, the administration is preparing a Greater Middle East Initiative that will add substance to its commitment to the transformation of the Middle East. Various military, political, and socioeconomic proposals related to this initiative are expected to be the centerpiece of a trio of high-level international gatherings in June: the G-8 summit in Sea Island, Georgia; the NATO summit in Istanbul; and the U.S.-European Union summit.

## Tunisia's Record on Democracy

Although multilateral efforts are a key component of the administration's Middle East strategy, they cannot substitute for bilateral dialogue on political reform. Tunisia is a model candidate for such dialogue.

Ben Ali seized power in a 1987 coup. Since then, in the words of a Freedom House report, his rule has become "increasingly autocratic and repressive." The report goes on to explain: "Freedom of expression is heavily restricted. . . . Arrests and indictments of dissidents declined in 2002 only because fewer Tunisians are willing to openly criticize the government." The State Department's Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2002 offered similar examples: "Security forces physically abused, intimidated, and harassed citizens who voiced public criticism of the Government. . . . and reportedly routinely used various methods of torture. . . . Arbitrary arrest and detention remained problems. . . . The President strongly influenced judicial decisions."

Elections in Tunisia reflect democracy in form, not content. The most recent presidential election was held in 1999, and Ben Ali won 99.94 percent of the vote. In a May 2002 referendum, constitutional changes that included the removal of presidential term limits were approved by a 99.52 percent vote. Ben Ali is up for reelection in October 2004, when parliamentary elections are scheduled to be held as well. In the previous parliamentary elections, the current ruling party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), won 94 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. In what can only be called political lily gilding, Ben Ali subsequently proposed a constitutional amendment creating another house of parliament (called the Chamber of Councilors), most of whose members are appointed by him.

To be sure, there is also much to admire about Tunisian policy. The country has a good record on women's rights, especially by regional standards. Its economy is strong, diversified, and market-oriented. Economic growth averaged 5 percent per year for most of the past fifteen years (though it fell to 2 percent in 2002 due to a drought). Per capita income is now over \$2,000 per year. Population growth is only 1 percent per year (although unemployment, estimated by the International Monetary fund at 15 percent, remains a problem). Perhaps most significantly, the Tunisian government defeated a virulent radical Islamic movement in the 1980s and early 1990s. Tunisia's success against Islamists sometimes required brutal measures, undertaken with U.S. acquiescence; the country did not permit Islamists to seize any role in social and cultural life, much less in politics. As a result, however, Tunisia is one of the Arab countries least visibly affected by the tide of Islamism.

## Ben Ali's Visit to Washington

U.S. relations with Tunisia have been good since the 1797 treaty of amity and commerce. The two countries have cooperated closely on many issues, including counterterrorism. (Tunisia has ample cause for such cooperation. In April 2002, al-Qaeda terrorists attacked the country's historic Djerba synagogue, killing more than a dozen European tourists and severely damaging one of several temples serving the country's Jewish community of about 2,000.) In addition, MEPI will open its regional office in Tunis in a few months.

Tunisia is one of the best candidates for reform in the Arab world. Its society is ethnically homogenous and largely middle class. Moreover, the government's heavy-handed repression runs the risk of stimulating a violent opposition; opening up the political system would improve stability by providing a means of expressing dissent within the framework of establishment politics rather than radicalism. The Bush administration is well positioned to urge Ben Ali to undertake reforms: he is friendly toward the United States, and Washington's dialogue with Tunisia is not complicated by other strategic interests that compete for policy attention (e.g., oil, military bases, the Arab-Israeli conflict).

The administration should pursue dialogue regarding reform in a constructive manner; adopting a heavy-handed, public approach toward Ben Ali would be inappropriate and counterproductive. President Bush can express interest

in a serious dialogue with Ben Ali regarding constitutional, political, judicial, and media reform. Any such dialogue should establish benchmarks and timetables for action. One good set of parameters would be the democratic standards set by the Community of Democracies. Tunisia was a participant in the 2000 Warsaw Conference that established that Community, but it was downgraded to observer status for the second meeting in 2002. The standards agreed to by the Community countries include many on which Tunisia needs to make progress, such as free and fair elections, freedom from arbitrary arrest, freedom of speech, the right to a fair trial, and separation of powers.

Dialogue about reform should also outline the benefits that Tunisia will receive as progress is made. At the same time, the United States should express its firm determination to go public if the reform program stalls. Tunisians are unlikely to take such initiatives seriously unless they are launched on a president-to-president basis.

If Washington cannot focus on making visible progress toward political reform in Tunisia -- which is better positioned for such reform than almost any other country in the Middle East -- then it is unlikely to succeed with reform elsewhere in the region. Indeed, if "the forward strategy for freedom" is not high on the Bush agenda with Ben Ali, then other U.S. friends -- such as Presidents Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Ali Abdallah Salih of Yemen -- will heave sighs of relief, concluding that reform is not a priority issue in Washington. In that circumstance, the Greater Middle East Initiative will almost surely be dead on arrival in the region.

Patrick Clawson is deputy director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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