

From Revolution to Transition in Tunisia

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President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's abrupt departure on January 14 set Tunisians upon a new and hopeful path to representative government and greater personal freedom, while setting off a wave of democratic protest across the region. Yet the tumultuous period from mid-December to mid-February—a time of popular uprising, political violence, Ben Ali's departure, and the early instability of a new government—has been followed by months of deliberately paced and publicly debated transition to a new government enjoying popular legitimacy. In fact, what is most remarkable about the process since Ben Ali's overthrow is how the people of Tunisia have, in a largely peaceful and orderly manner, set themselves to the immensely complex task of consolidating their democratic transition.

Tunisia's revolution (and the movement that came to be known as the "Arab Spring") began with the December 17 self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a young man eking out a living selling fruits and vegetables. Bouazizi's act struck a nerve. The critical fact so often missed in media accounts of the revolution is just *why* this one man's suicide resonated enough to ultimately bring down the Ben Ali regime. While Tunisia's leaders had long touted the country's successful economic development, the country's progress was more uneven than the Ben Ali regime was ever willing to concede publicly. Foreign investment and tourists may have flocked to Tunisia's coastal regions, but the arid interior had been largely neglected. In these so-called "shadow zones," residents suffered high levels of unemployment and poverty, while lacking any meaningful voice in government policy. Meanwhile, across the country the corruption of Ben Ali's family and friends, and the repressive nature of the political system, had further undermined the regime's legitimacy. Bouazizi's desperate act was a stark reminder of his neighbors' common plight, and the same day that his desperate act left him clinging to life in a hospital, protests broke out in Sidi Bouzid.

Sidi Bouzid was not alone in its grievances. As the police failed to quell unrest there in late December, protests began to emerge in other neglected provincial towns. With each protest, Tunisians grew bolder. As the new year began, demonstrations spread across the country. Cell phones and social media allowed information to bypass government censors, with Tunisians swapping protest photos and demonstration plans. Injuries and deaths—including Bouazizi's, when he succumbed to his injuries in early January—only added to the upswell of emotion among the emboldened populace. Ben Ali's series of televised addresses—at first stern, later pleading—and last-minute promises of reform (including the elimination of censorship and free parliamentary elections) and job creation failed to silence an emerging popular consensus that the President and his cronies had to go. The signature slogan became "dégage"—literally "disengage," but perhaps best translated as "get out"—as protests spread and intensified in early January. Our admonition to the regime to exercise restraint went unheeded, and the police used live fire on demonstrators in interior towns and cities such as Kasserine and Thala, killing at least

twenty the weekend of January 8-9. These killings were a tipping point, adding a compelling political element to strong socio-economic grievances, and demonstrations continued to spread, including to the capital city of Tunis. With thousands and thousands assembled at the widely reviled Ministry of Interior and rumors circulating that the army was refusing to follow Ben Ali's orders, the beleaguered President fled. In only four weeks, a formidable police state built over more than twenty years came crumbling down.

Bouazizi's tragic act and the mass outpouring of anger it triggered flowed from two decades of increasingly authoritarian and corrupt rule. Many Tunisians had greeted Ben Ali's 1987 ascension to power with relief, as he eased out aging President Bourguiba and promised reform. But that early promise faded. Elections became increasingly compromised and fraudulent, repression became the watchword of the state, and corruption flourished. By 2010, the regime's self-congratulatory attitude, fostered by a press under the thumb of the security organs, no longer reflected reality.

After 23 years of Ben Ali's reign, Tunisia found itself in poor company: denoted as "mostly unfree" in The Heritage Foundation's 2011 *Index of Economic Freedom*, ranked 59 out of 178 countries surveyed by Transparency International's 2010 *Corruption Perceptions Index*, and rated unequivocally "not free" in Freedom House's 2011 *Freedom in the World* survey. It was this environment which led Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in a January 2010 speech on global Internet freedom, to cite Tunisia among five countries with particularly offensive approaches to freedom of information. In fact, Ben Ali's misrule had created a potent combination of political repression, crony capitalism, and massive corruption, coupled with stagnant growth and unemployment (officially 13 percent before the revolution, but with unemployment of university graduates reported to be 23 percent).

It was not inevitable that these protests would bring down the regime, which had previously quashed occasional unrest in the interior, including major labor uprisings in the depressed mining towns of the interior in 2008 and 2009. Yet the cracks were widening and the 2010 campaign to amend the constitution to allow Ben Ali to run for a sixth term in 2014 only contributed to popular alienation. In the end, Ben Ali's own repression and corruption generated the political forces which he could not control and which led to his ouster.

Ben Ali's precipitous departure on January 14 was followed by a period of some instability and insecurity as the country's institutions faced the challenges of adapting to new roles in a new, but as-yet undefined, system. Police and internal security forces, tainted by their zealous defense of the Ben Ali regime before his departure, melted away, leaving Tunisia's relatively small military to take on the unfamiliar task of internal security. An interim government, blending opposition figures and holdovers from the former regime, was forced out.

The situation began to stabilize with the February 27 appointment as Prime Minister of Béji Caïd Essebsi, a seasoned and widely respected political figure with extensive service in the cabinets of former President Bourguiba. On March 3, the new

government announced that the next step would be elections for a Constituent Assembly with a mandate to review the country's constitution and establish a new system. This announcement provided Tunisians with the roadmap they were seeking, and most started looking to the future. They began the hard work of building their new republic. A key step on this path was the establishment of three independent bodies with the mandate of developing the new system, punishing the corruption of the former regime, and accounting for the human rights violations of the previous regime. The most prominent of these bodies, the Supreme Council to Realize the Goals of the Revolution, chaired by prominent jurist Iyadh Ben Achour, brings together Tunisia's most prominent political parties and civil society activists in a consensus-based organization charged with establishing the basic parameters for Tunisia's new era of contested politics.

The decision to create a Constituent Assembly was not without its critics, who argued that a quick move to presidential or parliamentary elections would stabilize the situation and speedily put a legitimate leadership in place. However, with the existing constitution custom-built to support Ben Ali and his ruling party, the consensus was the country was not ready for such elections, first needing a fundamental overhaul of the government's structure. Tunisia would have to start from scratch to put in place a new democratic framework before the country could go about voting for new leaders.

Since the revolution, Tunisians have been engaged in a nation-wide project of developing a new system which respects the rights and dignity of its citizens. This effort has been remarkable for its peacefulness, the open debate surrounding it, and the inclusion of civil society in a process intended to purge the system of the bad habits of the old regime and build new, democratic institutions. Some adjustments have had to be made—for example, the postponement of the Constituent Assembly elections from July to October, to allow for sufficient time to prepare—but progress has been remarkable. Political parties are proliferating, voter registration is underway, and momentum is building for Tunisia's first truly contested elections in its history. Not all parties agree on all the specifics of the process, of course, and the summer has seen continued demonstrations and disturbances as Tunisians continue to exercise their new freedoms to protest and express their grievances. Nonetheless, the path seems set toward the establishment of a genuinely representative Tunisian government.

As President Obama said in his May 19 speech, “[W]e face a historic opportunity. We have the chance to show that America values the dignity of the street vendor in Tunisia more than the raw power of the dictator.” Inspired by the actions and intentions of the Tunisian people, the United States is doing all it can to support this transition to democracy. United States’ support takes many forms: grants to US and international NGOs working with Tunisian institutions on election planning and management; training and professional development activities for journalists and bloggers; educational opportunities for high school and university students; and in-kind support for local civil society organizations to help them educate Tunisians on their institutions and their choices. Another critical area of US assistance is in supporting Tunisia's economic growth and facilitating US investment there. To support all these goals, the US government has recently announced over \$30 million in various types of assistance, as well as a commitment by the

Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) to catalyze private sector investment in the Middle East and North Africa via a \$2 billion fund. Recent months have seen a series of high-level US visitors—including Secretary Clinton; Under Secretary Burns; Senators McCain and Lieberman; General Electric CEO Immelt and other senior business executives; and USAID Administrator Shah—to hear Tunisian suggestions for how we can help and to look for opportunities to cooperate.

Tunisia continues to face significant challenges: designing legitimate institutions that effectively channel the people's will; righting the economy and implementing policies that will contribute to sustained growth and employment generation; and institutionalizing democratic practice in a country and a region which have seen far too little of it over the years. If the determination and seriousness of its citizenry and leadership over recent months are any indicator, however, we have reason to be optimistic.