



NOREF Report

Tunisia's democratic revolution and its actors

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Summary

The recent democratic revolution in Tunisia swept away the authoritarian regime of President Zein el Abidin Ben Ali who had long held a tight grip on power in the country. He used the police to spread fear among the population, appointed loyalists to the head of the national union and ensured the ruling party was the only real player in the political system. His family were a hive of corruption. When the population revolted, it was therefore swift and decisive.

This analysis considers who the key players were in these dramatic events. It looks at why the army betrayed Ben Ali and came out in support of the protestors. It provides an overview of the political landscape in the country, both under authoritarianism and now. It also considers the rise of civil society during the revolt, and the role they may play in the years to come. Lastly, it looks at the hope for democracy in Tunisia.

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The seeds of revolt

As information begins to flow, it is becoming clear that the recent democratic revolution in Tunisia that swept President Ben Ali from power was a combination of popular revolt and a decisive move by the army. While social and economic difficulties were a major factor in the revolt, it was the combination of security rule and corruption in the country that really mobilised the people and triggered the protest.

Compared to other Arab countries, Tunisia's brand of authoritarianism was relatively unsophisticated and was led by an unimaginative leader. Ben Ali responded to any protests with crude suppression and used his security forces in all areas of life. Corruption was also very high and largely concentrated among a small group of the president's family members, thus making them an easy target of popular anger – in countries where corruption permeates all institutions, it is far more difficult to remedy through the simple demotion of a leader and his immediate entourage.

The key players in Tunisia

Police

The number of police under the direct command of the President and Ministry of Interior swelled under Ben Ali, reaching some 120,000 men. They were supported in their surveillance of the population by thousands of agents, who permeated the administration, ruling party and all sectors of the

economy, including tourism. Yet, an interesting feature of the security forces in Tunisia (as in Egypt, Algeria, Syria and Baathist Iraq) is that, the larger they grew, the less effective and more brutal they became. Recruited to spread fear within society, they themselves were controlled from the inside through fear of their leadership.

Army

The army has a historically complicated relationship with Ben Ali. The president was himself originally a military man, appointed Minister of Interior in 1985 by his predecessor, Habib Bourguiba. Additionally, Ben Ali's first wife was the daughter of the army chief of staff, General Kafi, who played an instrumental role in securing the position of minister for his son-in-law. Yet, Ben Ali carried out a coup against Bourguiba in 1987, divorced from his first wife and sacked her father as chief of staff. Later, in 2002, he was accused of organising a plane accident in which 13 of the country's top army leaders died, known as the "Skik affair". In fact, the army was largely marginalised under Ben Ali, reduced to less than 40,000 personnel.

The army has been popular during the revolt and described as "patriotic" by the public. It came out in support of the demonstrators, refusing to shoot at the population and seeking to protect civilians from repression by the security forces. More recent information has emerged which indicates that the army played a more proactive role in the revolt, however, deciding early on that it would betray Ben Ali. Having refused to comply with Ben Ali's orders to suppress the protests, the chief of staff of the army, Rachid Ammar, is said to have informed Washington of his position. He also consulted with the Algerian military to ensure that they would not intervene in favour of the president.

The army's role in the revolt was therefore clearly political, in that it made the decision not to protect Ben Ali's regime any longer. This cannot be labelled a "coup", of course, because the trigger came from society, but there was a clear arrangement by which the army ordered the president to yield power. Ammar is said to have allowed Ben Ali three hours to leave the country, after which Tunisia's airspace would be closed. The scenario is strikingly similar to that of the demotion of Bourguiba by Ben Ali

himself in 1987, when Ben Ali consulted with and sought the support of the French government. He also consulted with the Algerian government, to avoid any temptation on its part to intervene.

The national trade union

L'Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (Tunisian General Labour Union, or UGTT) is historically a major social force and a key interlocutor of the government in the organisation and management of social affairs in Tunisia. It has traditionally mediated in social conflicts but has also played a rallying role at historic moments in the country's history, such as during the independence period. Later it became the main countervailing force to the one-party system under both Bourguiba and Ben Ali. In 1989, Ben Ali decided to change the top leadership of the UGTT, filling it with loyal men. This neutralised the union and all but ended its important role in the country. However, the structures of the union remained. Its sections continued to form a tight web, organised to represent all important professional sectors in each city. This was to prove important during the revolt.

In the revolt that started in December 2010, it was the union rank and file, as opposed to the leadership, who mobilised the different sections and structured the movement in its early days. It developed the slogans, orchestrated the strikes in different cities, managed the demonstrations and negotiated with the army. While the union's top leaders had been co-opted by the regime, they had not been corrupted, and their image remained untainted in the eyes of the workers. That's why three ministers in the first post-Ben Ali government came from the UGTT – after discussions and disagreements inside the union, the ministers eventually withdrew.

Political parties

A major concern for Tunisians after the fall of Ben Ali was to ensure that not only he disappear but that his system be dismantled. The main cleavage has been and remains between those who call for conciliation and those who advocate for the eradication of all remnants of Ben Ali's regime and the dismantling of the ruling party. Before the revolt, the political system in Tunisia was entirely structured by the ruling party, the Rassemblement

Constitutionnel Démocratique (Constitutional Democratic Rally, or RCD). Other small parties were brought in to present a semblance of pluralism, but had no real existence; they were mere creations of the regime.

In the week following the fall of Ben Ali, political and social forces were polarised around the debate over the future of the RCD. The discussion over whether it should be eradicated or not was resolved through pressure from the street, with demonstrators demanding that it be dismantled and taking over its buildings. Ministers who were members of the RCD resigned from the party in order to remain in government. Distrust towards the RCD party has remained very strong. In early February, supporters of Ben Ali were suspected of trying to infiltrate the system again through the party. Hence the decision to suspend all activities and close down all branches of the party, pending the final decision which will almost certainly be its dissolution.

A host of small political parties also coloured the Tunisian political scene before the revolt. Six parties in addition to the RCD were authorised under Ben Ali. However, they were either of no significance at all or under close surveillance. Their newspapers were regularly banned. In fact, most of them had an elite base and no credible strategy. Subjected to suppression and control, their main efforts were focused on survival rather than on gaining power.

In 2007, a group of some ten different political parties engaged in a process of dialogue with a view to building a coalition, which was announced as the “October 18 declaration”. Setting their ideological differences aside, liberals, leftists, nationalists, secularists and Islamists decided to join forces based on pragmatic considerations and agreed to prioritise one common objective: namely to exit from authoritarianism. The experiment was short-lived and the parties found themselves struggling again to survive, frustrated in their attempts to deepen their dialogue. Unable to develop a strategy, the coalition remained largely a declaration of principles and intentions. But it did represent an interesting experience, which has played a role in the first political contacts established in the hours and days following Ben Ali’s flight from the country.

The political future of Tunisia

The former coalition members of the “October 18 declaration” have now formed a new united front. They are called “January 14” and comprise leftists, nationalists, Islamists and secular liberals. Names of prominent intellectuals, academics and civil society leaders (particularly those of human rights organisations) are now therefore emerging as the potential figures of the new era. There is also a strong component of women leaders in this group, but they are not yet in government.

In government are the Progressive Democratic Party, founded by Najib el Chabbi, the Tajdid party (formerly the communist party) and Forum démocratique pour le travail et la liberté (Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties, or FDTL), led by Mustafa Ben Jaafar. The Rassemblement pour la République, formed in exile, is led by the prominent intellectual Moncef Marzouki, who returned from France to Tunisia in the days following the fall of the regime. Other parties banned under Ben Ali and not represented in the current government are the Communist Workers Party of Hemma Hammani and the Islamist Annahda.

Islamist parties

Annahda was harshly suppressed by Ben Ali, who used the Islamist threat as a pretext to overthrow Bourguiba. Its leadership is in exile and its elderly leader, Rashed Ghannouchi, is said to be tired and his thinking outdated among the younger leadership, which includes sophisticated thinkers and articulate intellectuals. The question of Annahda winning a majority vote in a free election is not to be excluded in the medium term. However, it is more likely that, in the first election at least, the party will present itself as one player among others in the pluralistic political scene. The party has the potential and the intellectual resources to evolve towards the model of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP), by softening its discourse and positions to adapt to mainstream Tunisians, who have a fairly clear consensus on the social model and values they want.

The legal status of women, the protection of their personal rights (eg, divorce, child custody, inheritance, and other issues), equality in work and representation in public institutions, all enjoy a strong consensus among the political, economic

and intellectual elites in Tunisia, as well as within significant portions of the middle class. The key leaders of Annahda have not questioned this pattern of modernisation, which started under Bourguiba and was preserved under Ben Ali.

The influence of Islamists in Tunisia is not negligible and may well represent a challenge. After more than two decades of surviving underground, as well as the exile and imprisonment of most of its members, it is objectively difficult to know how the Islamists have evolved in their thinking, the types of relationships they have with other Islamist groups in the region, and how they will operate to gain the support and votes of the people. In addition to Annahda, there is a liberal democratic current of Islamists in Tunisia, who are likely to join forces with the secular groups, but the re-composition of the political scene will require some time.

The rise of civil society

Together with the UGTT, Tunisia's professional associations, students, university professors and human rights organisations all played an instrumental role in casting a civic face on the revolt. The Tunisian League for Human Rights, along with a whole host of human rights activists and opposition journalists, are now well-known among the public as a result of their dramatic protests (primarily hunger strikes). Women's movements were particularly vocal and confident, as they benefited from Ben Ali's declared policy of promoting women. Lawyers and judges' unions, whose members felt that their profession had been stripped of its credibility under Ben Ali, were also prominent.

Civil society's influence has continued post-revolt. Three national commissions were established in the week after the fall of Ben Ali: the commission for constitutional reforms; the commission investigating corruption; and the commission for establishing the truth. Each commission is headed by a prominent public figure from civil society with high moral authority. Beyond their specific missions, these commissions represent an interesting model of the new structures of governance that flank the traditional branches of power and seem designed to compensate for the weakness of the political parties in Tunisia today.

Political realignment

An institutional process seems underway to ensure an orderly transition and Tunisia will be very interesting to observe as a model of how mechanisms and new bodies are emerging to ensure the participation of civil society. There are, however, early signs of polarization between secular and Islamist forces. Annahda is the object of intense debate and there are suspicions about its real agenda.

It will be interesting to monitor the content of their discourse and the messages they convey about their position on women, Islamic law, and freedom of expression. The consensus in Tunisia as in Egypt is that Islamists are a legitimate partner in the democratization process but the real questions focus on the content of their social programme and the degree of conservatism that may be found in their vision of society.

The first indications of the movement's strategy are that it will seek to recover its influence in society through sermons in mosques, media outlets and solidarity networks, all areas from which it has been banned over the past 20 year. This could mean that it will follow the pattern of other Islamist movements in Arab countries: participation in government with a focus on portfolios that can increase their social influence (eg, education and social affairs). Longer-term strategies can only be built on speculation at this stage.

Tunisia has only just begun a process of re-birth, one in which all social and political factors and forces are set in motion and will rise to the surface after a long freeze. New players are set to voice their demands and seek to weigh in on economic, social and political decisions. A process of reshuffling and realignment in the political scene is to be expected in the coming period. Some alliances will form while other parties, not least the Islamists, may undergo divisions once faced with the test of power. The organisation of orderly and credible elections will be critical.