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TUNISIA: THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSITION

Two years after the revolution, high hopes for the Tunisian transition are giving way to a more sober assessment of the situation. The major challenges facing the country today are political instability, reaching consensus on the role of religion in the state, reforming the internal security forces, and improving the socio-economic outlook.

Tunisia’s domestic situation seemed to augur well for the transition. Its predominantly Arab and Sunni Muslim population is well-educated, with over one-third of Tunisians in tertiary education, and traditionally oriented towards moderation. The country had a civil society and a separation of military and political power. Though it possesses few natural resources (phosphates and petroleum), the country boasted a vibrant tourism industry. Optimism appeared well-founded as the country rapidly established an interim government tasked with organising elections to form a national constituent assembly that would draft a new constitution.

However, recent developments prompt a more sober assessment of the situation in Tunisia. The draft constitution was delayed and only published in April. Unemployment has changed very little from pre-revolutionary levels. Two years into the transition, the key challenges facing the country are maintaining political stability, defining the relationship between religion and politics, reforming remnants of the previous regime, and generating more inclusive growth to absorb high unemployment and reduce severe regional inequalities.

As the first Arab Spring country to embark on transforming authoritarian state structures and the economy, the Tunisian case is a reminder that transitions in the Middle East and North Africa are highly complex, unstable, and lengthy processes. If Tunisia falters still further, the prospects for other revolutionary states look all the more uncertain. Such a development could also risk strengthening the position of those in favour of “managed” and often cosmetic reform within the region.

However, the transitional process began to encounter a number of setbacks. The completion of the constitution was delayed. One of the reasons for the deferral was the divisive issue of the place of religion in the state. The stalemate over the constitution resulted in parliamentary and presidential elections being pushed back from June to the end of the year. Political uncertainty generated by these deferments has been exacerbated by increasing polarisation.

Background to the current situation

The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia’s neglected interior on 17 December 2010 provided the decisive spark for the Tunisian revolution. The main grievances that led to the uprising were a lack of representation, social injustices generated by a corrupt regime, persistently high unemployment, and uneven regional development. In the face of mass protest and calls for his departure, President Zine El Abadine Ben Ali fled the country on 14 January 2011.

Promising initial steps were made toward democratic transition. The first free and fair elections were held in October 2011, producing a coalition government comprising the Islamic party Ennahdha, which garnered 41 per cent of the vote, and two centre-left non-Islamist parties, Congress for the Republic (French acronym CPR) and Ettakatol, which won 14 per cent and 10 per cent, respectively. The newly-elected government stated that it would call a new round of elections on completion of the new constitution in one year’s time. Economic growth, which had slumped in 2011, also began to recover in 2012.

The situation in Tunisia remains tense - funeral of the assassinated opposition leader, Chokri Belaïd. Tunis, 8 February 2013.

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among political elites, brought to a cli-
max in February with the assassination of
vocal opposition politician Chokri Belaid,
secretary-general of the leftist Unified Na-
tionalist Democratic Party. In the shadow of
these developments, Tunisia’s economic
recovery risks being derailed.

Political landscape
Following the revolution, Ben Ali’s Con-
stitutional Democratic Rally (French ac-
ronym RCD) party was disbanded, and
senior members, who had held office over
the past decade, were banned from run-
nning or voting in the elections. Ennahdha
clearly emerged as a major political actor
with the stated aim of promoting a mod-
erate vision of Islam compatible with the
principles of democracy and citizenship as
the basis of rights. Its electoral success is
explained by its continued capacity to mo-
bilise religious and rural communities, de-
spite many of its activists and supporters
being driven underground or into exile and
its leadership being transferred to London
and Paris under the Ben Ali regime. It also
benefited from its popular legitimacy and
perceived incorruptibility, as well as the
broad appeal of reconciling Islam and democ-
ropy in a country where the popula-
tion is predominantly Muslim, but accu-
tomised to a secular state.

Like Ennahdha, junior partners in the troi-
ka government also existed prior to the
revolution, although only Ettakatol formed
part of a legalised opposition under Ben
Ali. With liberal, but socially sensitive agen-
das, both parties enjoy strong support in the
more prosperous coastal regions. En-
annahda’s willingness to work with these
parties seemed a promising sign for tran-
sition through consensus. However, divi-
sions within the governing coalition have
emerged, revealing the troika’s fragility. Et-
takatol and CPR have been frustrated with
the government’s inability to respond to
the country’s pressing challenges as well as
by Ennahdha’s lack of consultation and
appointment of loyalists to key positions
within the state.

Ennahdha itself is divided and challenged
by both Islamists and non-Islamists. Divi-
sions exist between pragmatists and con-
servatives within its political elite, as well
as between its party elite and its more
militant base. It also does not wish to lose
ground to the Salafists, who were not rep-
resented in the elections, but wield politi-
cal influence. While traditionally reticent
to engage in national politics, Salafists
have become increasingly politically active,
seeking the inclusion of reference to Sha-
aria law in the constitution and restrictions
on blasphemy. Most Salafists come from
lower middle class and poor segments of
society on the periphery of urban centres
and in the country’s interior, where they
have stepped in to fill a vacuum in public
services and are involved in the informal
economy. They compete with Ennahdha
for support from this constituency.

Ennahdha’s dominance of the political
scene has prompted non-Islamist par-
ties to unite against it. The most signifi-
cant bloc to emerge is centre-leftist and
led by Nidaa Tounes, a party created in
2012 by Beji Caid Essebsi, who served as
prime minister in the interim govern-
ment. It brings together leftists, liberals,
and former members of Ben Ali’s RCD.
Nidaa Tounes has formed a union with
other non-Islamist parties and enjoys the
support of the powerful Union Générale
Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT) labour fed-
eration, which resisted co-optation by the
previous regime and has the capacity to
mobilise across different sectors of society,
as well as cross-regionally. The presence
of former RCD members in Nidaa Tounes, as
well as other opposition parties, continues
to cause controversy. But, as yet, no whole-
sale exclusion of former officials from poli-
tics has occurred, making them potential
players in steering the transition.

Religion, the state, and identity
Political stability is threatened by growing
polarisation between Islamists and non-
Islamists, as well as intra-Islamist compe-
tition. The role of religion in the state is a
particularly divisive issue. Initiatives put
forward by Ennahdha parliamentarians
during the drafting of the constitution,
only to be later withdrawn, were a reflec-
tion of the dilemma Ennahdha faces:
appealing to religiously conservative mem-
bers of its party and society as well as
avoiding alienating liberal-progressives. In
February 2012, Ennahdha parliamentar-
ians proposed making Sharia law the
basis of the Tunisian legal system, despite
the party having stated during its elec-
toral campaign that it would not do so.
After weeks of public protest and a threat
to step down by Speaker of the National
Constituent Assembly Mustapha Ben
Jaafar, Ennahdha’s governing council de-
cided that the party should not support
the proposal. The inclusion of a clause in
the pre-draft constitution defining women
as complementary to men in family life, as
well as the July 2012 proposal criminalising
blasphemy, were also put forward and
then withdrawn in response to mass pro-
tests as well as criticism by the media and
civil rights groups.

Ennahdha’s perceived lenience towards
Salafist efforts to enforce what they see
as morally correct behaviour has also had
a polarising effect, and is also a reflec-
tion of its competition with Salafists for
ultra-conservative vote. Traditionally more
concerned with social norms than politics,
Salafists have disrupted university cam-
puses, demanding that only women wear-
ing the niqab be allowed to attend classes,
and called for restrictions on the arts, pro-
testing against the showing of some films
and attacking the US embassy in reaction
to the US-made film “The Innocence of
Muslims” in September 2012. While the
government has been accused of being
too tolerant of Salafists, its recent clamp-
down on the radical Salafist group Ansar
al-Sharia, which claimed responsibility
for the attack on the US embassy, suggest
that it is now willing to take a firmer position
in relation to this strain of Salafism. The
Salafist movement as a whole, however, is
unlikely to dwindle. Moreover, continued
controversy over provisions related to role
of religion, which remain vague, are likely
to emerge as the final draft constitution is
debated and later voted on in the Constitu-
tent Assembly and, failing acceptance by a
two-thirds majority, in a public referendum.

Reforming the security sector
Security sector reform (SSR) is essential to
underpinning the transition and trans-
forming the relationship between the state
and citizens. Remnants of the previous re-
The period from 2010 to 2011 saw a de-

cline in revenue from tourism, with the

number of tourists falling by more than
50 per cent, and a drop in foreign direct
investment by more than a half. The Tun-

esian economy has also been affected by an
unfavourable regional and international
environment, notably in relation to Libya
and Europe. Tunisia has experienced a re-
duction in trade with Libya as result of the
latter’s civil war and subsequent instabil-
ity. The European Union (EU) is Tunisia’s
largest trading partner, and the economic
crisis in Europe has resulted in a reduction
of Tunisian exports.

Against this difficult internal and exter-
nal backdrop, there is a pressing need to
generate more inclusive growth and to re-
duce high unemployment, which remains
at 16.5 per cent, particularly amongst the
youth population, which constitutes 70
per cent of the unemployed. Youth be-
tween 15–29 years old form one-third of
the labour force. The economy has not
been growing fast enough to provide
young people with employment, though.
Adding to this demographic trend is a
skills mismatch. While the number of uni-
versity graduates has been steadily grow-
ing, reaching approximately 16 per cent in
2010, most available employment consists
of low-skill jobs in the informal economy.

Added to the continued problem of high
unemployment, regional inequalities per-
sist. Social unrest is still palpable in poorer
interior regions. In Siliana in November
2012, social protests resulted in several days
of clashes between security forces and pro-
testors. Similar confrontations took place
in Kef, also in the interior, and in Ben
Guerdane, in the southeast, in mid-Jan-
uary. These protests were directed at the
government and its failure to improve the
situation in Tunisia’s poor and rural inner
regions and outlying areas of the south. An
inability to address unemployment and the
concerns of the vulnerable and those in
the depressed interior risks further polarising
political and social actors.

Socio-economic challenges
A successful transition is also threatened
by a lack of improvement in economic
growth compared to pre-revolutionary
levels and continued high unemployment.
The already difficult socio-economic situ-
ation was badly affected by the uprising.
The period from 2010 to 2011 saw a de-

Efforts have been made to reform the in-
ternal security forces. The impact of meas-
ures taken is ambiguous, though. The
political police, responsible for collecting
intelligence on Ben Ali’s opponents, have
been disbanded. However, it is also unclear
whether they have been simply integrated
into the police force, and their files have
still not been made public. While police
training in human rights has begun, rules
of engagement, police custody, and po-
lice intelligence practices remain largely
unchanged since the Ben Ali era. Ulti-
mately, police culture needs to undergo a
more radical transformation that reflects
changed state-societal relations.

In a related area, the independence of the
judiciary remains questionable, with cor-
ruption still existing within the judicial
system. The main oversight body, the Su-
preme Council of Magistrates, which is re-
sponsible for appointing, promoting, and
penalising magistrates, was directly con-
trolled by the executive under Ben Ali. It
remains only partially reformed. Purges
of judges have taken place. However, this
has happened without specification of the rea-
sors for dismissal, and it is believed that a
number of judges have been forced to re-
sign for political reasons. There have been
similar inadequacies in the area of tran-
sitional justice, which had been intended
to address human rights abuses under the
former regime. So far, the process has
mostly focused on abuses during the revo-
lution rather than those that occurred un-
der Ben Ali. It has been also appropriated
by the state rather than being placed in
the hands of civil society.

The outlook
Two years after the revolution, Tunisia’s
transition looks far more fragile than ex-
pected. The chief grievances that led to
the revolution have not been adequately
addressed. In order to stabilise the situ-
ation, a number of measures need to be
taken, such as developing a framework
that supports human rights-based reform
of internal security forces, institutional
reforms that enable greater transpar-
ency and oversight of the security forces,
and further reform of the Supreme Coun-
cil of the Judiciary. In the socio-economic
sphere, more decisive measures are re-
quired to address the structural problems
affecting the economy, notably improv-
ing the business environment for invest-
ment and small and medium-sized enter-
prises, reducing the mismatch between
skills and jobs, and increasing investment
in the interior of the country. However,
transforming existing realities in a short-
time frame is unrealistic due to the do-

Swiss engagement
Since the beginning of 2011, Switzerland
has been engaged in supporting the tran-
sitions in North Africa. Tunisia is one of the
focal points of that assistance. Switzerland
has been primarily affected by the revolu-
tion and transition in Tunisia in relation to
the Ben Ali fortune, refugees, and irregular
migration. Cognisant of Switzerland’s eco-

conomic and security interests in a stable
democratic Tunisia, Swiss authorities acted
promptly to support the transition pro-
cess, freezing approximately CHF 60 mil-

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\text{Above all, the governing coalition needs to show that it has credible policies to alleviate socio-economic difficulties.}
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\begin{align*}
&\text{Add to this demographic trend is a skills mismatch. While the number of university graduates has been steadily growing, reaching approximately 16 per cent in 2010, most available employment consists of low-skill jobs in the informal economy.} \\
&\text{Added to the continued problem of high unemployment, regional inequalities persist. Social unrest is still palpable in poorer interior regions. In Siliana in November 2012, social protests resulted in several days of clashes between security forces and protesters. Similar confrontations took place in Kef, also in the interior, and in Ben Guerdane, in the southeast, in mid-January. These protests were directed at the government and its failure to improve the situation in Tunisia’s poor and rural inner regions and outlying areas of the south. An inability to address unemployment and the concerns of the vulnerable and those in the depressed interior risks further polarising political and social actors.}
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Federal Department of Economic Affairs (the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, SECO), its support for the transition focuses on three main areas of assistance: transition to democracy and human rights; economic development and job creation; and migration and protection of the vulnerable.

Of particular note are projects within the programme that address issues crucial for the transition, such as SSR, reduction of regional development inequalities, and job creation. In conjunction with the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of the Armed Forces (DCAF), Switzerland provides expertise in the area of SSR, enjoying the status of a trusted and neutral partner. The Swiss programme also aims to support the creation of 10,000 jobs by assisting young people and women in rural areas to set up small enterprises. Switzerland is also working to improve access to public infrastructure and services in interior regions, creating jobs through their realisation, as well as through the provision of micro-finance and micro-insurance.