

Tunisia: Squaring the 'Islamic democracy' circle

Written by Eric Walberg Эрик Вальберг/ Уолберг □□□□□ □□□□
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The self-immolation of a 26-year-old Tunisian fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, in December 2010, was the spark that set off the 2011 Arab Spring uprising. Do events there since prove or disprove those who see the Arab Spring as an important turning point in the Middle East?

In an irony of imperialism witnessed throughout the region, Islamists in Tunisia (11 million, 98% Sunni) were repressed more after 'independence' in 1956, than before under the French imperialists. The French handed power to secularist President Habib Bourguiba, who was pushed aside in a coup in 1988, and his corrupt and ruthless successor Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, was president for the next 23 years.

Contrast with Egypt

Just as Egypt's Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak initially courted the Islamists only to turn against them, members of Tunisia's Muslim Brotherhood-linked group Ennahda (founded in 1981, meaning Renaissance) were allowed to participate in the 1989 elections as independents and, despite blatant repression and vote rigging during the elections, garnered 17% of the vote. Ben Ali cynically used this show of electoral democracy two years later, when he imprisoned 25,000 of these publicly-declared supporters of Ennahda, and had its founder, Rachi al-Ghannouchi, tortured and sentenced to life imprisonment.

This betrayal lived on in the collective memory of Tunisians, leading to the historic 2011 uprising. Following the collapse of Ben Ali's regime, Ennahda won 89 of the 217 seats in the elections of October 2011 to lead a left-Islamic coalition government headed by Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, leader of Ennahda, and secularist President Moncef Marzouki, a former

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dissident exiled in France. Marzouki, author of *Dictators on Watch: A Democratic Path for the Arab World*, argued during the election campaign that progressive forces should unite with moderate Islamists in recognition of the importance of Islam in the Arab world, criticizing the “old left, secular and Francophone, and totally disconnected from the real problems of Tunisian society”.

Egyptians also elected an MB government, but events took a very different course in the two countries. Tunisia's army is much weaker than Egypt's, and the secular political system was entirely discredited, unlike Egypt's enduring myth of the heroic Colonel Gamal Abdel-Nasser. So in contrast to Egypt, there has been no coup in Tunisia, though assassinations and secular-Salafi frictions show that underlying tensions remain. The secularists are well entrenched, and the MB-dominated government has been careful to accommodate them, producing a constitution which was broadly accepted.

The new constitution, passed by the parliament in January 2014 (200-12 with 4 abstentions),

- makes Tunisia a decentralized and open government
- recognizes Islam as the official state religion, but protects freedom of belief
- provides for some restrictions on free speech, most notably in banning attacks on religion and accusations of being a non-believer
- provides for gender equality
- protects the nation's natural resources
- demands the government take steps to fight corruption.
- divides executive power between the president and prime minister.

There is in fact little difference between Tunisia's new constitution and that which was approved by two-thirds of Egyptians in December 2012 under its MB, which Egypt's hysterical secularists insisted would turn Egypt into an Islamic state. The different trajectories of events in Tunisia and Egypt have more to do with geopolitics—Tunisia is neither strategic nor oil-rich—and its weak army, than any substantive difference between the Islamists.

One step forward, two steps back?

Recent events have been a cause of criticism of the Tunisian Islamists for possibly undermining the initial gains of the uprising. To placate secularists, the MB-headed government resigned after the constitutional referendum, giving way to a caretaker government in December 2013 in preparation for parliamentary and presidential elections this autumn.

More disturbingly, virtually all those convicted for their crimes under the Ben Ali regime have been freed from prison (Ben Ali lives in luxury in Saudi Arabia). Five of the most senior officials of the former government were freed from prison recently, including Rafik Haj Kacem, the interior minister at the time of the revolution, and Ali Seriati, the powerful head of the presidential security service. An appeals courts reduced their sentences to time served.

Mohamed Ghariani, the former secretary general of Ben Ali's Constitutional Democratic Rally party, was released last summer and has returned to politics as an adviser to the current presidential front-runner, Beji Caid Essebsi. Ben Ali officials are no longer banned from running

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for political office. Virtually all police accused of murdering demonstrators were given suspended sentences or acquitted.

Ennahda's leaders accepted the judicial rulings, reasoning that to exclude opponents was destabilizing in the long run, and that it was better to let them face the test of the ballot box. "It is the Tunisians who will say we do not want to go back to the old regime. That is a much more clear and effective message," Ameer Larayedh, head of Ennahda's political bureau, said. The releases must also be seen in the context of Egypt's coup last year, which led to a massacre and outlawing of the MB by the military, egged on by the secularists.

Truth and Dignity Commission

However, Tunisia's MB-led government did manage to issue a "law on transitional justice" in its last days in office, prepared by the Ministry of Human Rights and Transitional Justice, setting up a 15-member Truth and Dignity Commission to hold hearings during the next five years to expose the repression of citizens since 1956. Special chambers will be set up to hear the most serious cases.

Sihem Bensedrine, a human rights activist and former journalist who heads the Commission, said that the tens of thousands of cases of torture, rape and murders during 55 years of dictatorship would be investigated. The cases of martyrs of the revolution will be a priority. The main aim is to prevent any return to dictatorship. "To have a Serati in prison is not sufficient for me. We want to show all the pieces of the machine, and show this is how you construct a dictatorship and this is how you deconstruct it," Bensedrine told the New York Times.

This starkly contrasts with Egypt, where not only have virtually all Mubarak-era officials escaped justice, but the new President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was the man behind the notorious virginity tests of protesters after 2011, allowing soldiers to effectively violate female protesters, solely in order to intimidate and humiliate them. Sisi is now portrayed by the reinvigorated secularists as their savior.

NGOs

Another contrast with Egypt is the role of NGOs. Egypt was inundated in the late Mubarak period and immediately after its collapse by westerners arrogantly claiming to have the answers for Egypt's problems. Finally, Egyptians had had enough, and many such westerners were sent packing and their organizations put under greater scrutiny or shut down.

But not all westerners have the intent of undermining Islam. Muslims 'abroad' can support genuine democratic development in Muslim-majority countries—'Islamic democracy'—such as the American Muslim Council's Tunisian branch of its Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID).

CSID have organized workshops and conferences on democracy and Islam in Tunisia since 2011. They are working closely with Tunisia's Islamists to help them in the upcoming elections, though scrupulously avoiding any charge of financing or otherwise meddling in the political

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process.

Such interaction between Muslims 'abroad' and in traditionally Muslim countries will be increasingly important as both communities grow in strength and demonstrate that 'Islam is the solution' in society. This is in contrast to western pseudo-NGOs such as the US government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, which are fronts for undermining genuine democracy in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries.

Of course, this is slippery stuff. Will CSID's advice push the MB towards political irrelevancy, even apostasy? Certainly, its intent is admirable. It is dedicated to "studying Islamic and democratic political thought and merging them into a modern Islamic democratic discourse".

Just as flies are attracted to honey, US academics and politicians of all stripes are active in CSID events. At the same time, Tunisians are invited to the dozens of centers of Islamic studies in US universities, which were set up after WWII to fashion future unwitting handmaidens for the imperial project. The powerful US understandably tries absorb and shape potential and actual members of Tunisia's political and economic elite, and Islamists must be on their guard.

CSID organized a celebration of the new Tunisian constitution in Washington DC in February where speakers included Gerald Feierstein, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, and the heads of the quasi-governmental 'NGOs' such as the National Council on US-Arab Relations, the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, and the US Institute of Peace.

At the same time, CSID is targeted by Islamophobe sites such as globalmbwatch.com. And Ghannouchi was key speaker at their conference last year. Navigating the shoals of Islamophobia requires strategic thinking and wisdom. As thousands of courageous Muslims are murdered, tortured and languish in jail in Egypt, we can only wish Tunisians—and their genuine friends—well.

[*Crescent International*](#)