

## TUNISIA: THE END OF THE BEGINNING

The crisis in Tunisia is at the end of its heroic phase: the corrupt presidency has been overthrown by a revolutionary popular uprising and the nihilistic violence of its paramilitary base in the presidential guard and the police has been countered by the intervention of the Tunisian army. Yet, even if the formal head of the old regime is gone, the administrative and political entity which has ruled Tunisia since independence in 1956 remains. True to its autocratic nature, the Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD) clearly has no intention of relinquishing power, and no viable alternative to it has yet emerged. How this contradiction is resolved will be the drama of the interim period to come, before presidential and legislative elections take place, as provided for in the constitution, within two months.

The question therefore is whether the Tunisian political establishment will accept such a compromise with the past and what will happen if they do not. The first signs are that they are not prepared to throw away the advantages they have won, as overeager opposition politicians now renounce the ministerial positions they had so quickly accepted the day before. Interestingly enough, it was the three cabinet members from the Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (UGTT) who first objected to the retention of leading ministers from the previous government, followed by Mustapha ben Jaafar, leader of the Forum Démocratique de Travail et des Libertés (FDTL). Yet, of course, the UGTT was formally linked to the political structures created by the RCD, although there have been serious tensions between its leadership and that of the RCD ever since the riots of January 1978. Indeed, it was the UGTT local leaderships that seem to have organised the rolling strikes and demonstrations throughout December that led to regime collapse.

This highlights a worrying contradiction at the heart



A Tunisian walks past graffiti saying: "Freedom at Last" and Laicite (Secularism)

of the Tunisian political scene: although there was a legalised opposition composed of eight political parties, together with three more – including the Workers Communist Party and the Islamist an-Nahda movement – that continued to be excluded by the regime, none of them can offer a credible alternative government to one dominated by the RCD. RCD leaders know this and seem determined to exploit their advantage to the utmost, thus threatening the hopes and ambitions of Tunisian society for genuine democracy. However, on the other hand, there is also a revitalised, if still largely informal, civil society, apparently led by local UGTT branches, alongside human rights groups and journalists, that has already flexed its muscles, and from which the true political alternatives will eventually emerge. All this must also be set against the dramatic role played by the 'new media' – Twitter, Facebook, the internet and satellite television – in galvanising the demonstrations. In addition, since 2005, there have been clandestine attempts to weld some kind of coalition between these disparate groups and those political movements still excluded from the formal political scene.

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to exercise self-censorship and where the dictatorial regime was buttressed by a repressive police force. Certainly unemployment was the catalyst that brought the regime down, yet unemployment might be understood as the last straw which broke the camel's back: material deprivation was but one aspect of the theft of the Tunisian people's dignity, the other aspect being disrespect for the rule of law and human rights.

## It's the economy *and* the politics, stupid!

It is fallacious to introduce a distinction between economic reforms and political ones and to assign them different logics which are mutually exclusive: this simply amounts to a convenient way to gloss over 'the political economy of repression', as Béatrice Hibou put it a few years ago in her book *La force de l'obéissance: économie politique de la répression en Tunisie*. Economics and politics were closely intertwined in a system of governance that benefited a corrupt and privileged elite while oppressing the wider population. To turn a blind eye to that reality amounts to repeating the same mistakes which were made before 1989 and the demise of the Eastern bloc. In those days not only East Germany but also the Soviet Union were praised in some quarters for their powerful economies: the GDR was said to rank as the world's tenth largest industrial nation. Some nostalgists wanted to underline the benefits of the German communist regime even though it was shored up by an intricate and extensive network of informants. This partly explains the 'unpreparedness' of the observers and bystanders who were taken by surprise by the events of 1989 – and by the more recent events in Tunisia. Certainly, revolutions are not necessarily foreseeable. Yet it was surely possible to put the rose-tinted glasses aside and look at the real nature of the Tunisian regime. This would have spared the Union both embarrassment and money. After all funds were disbursed by the EU while the ruling family stuffed its pockets with the wealth of the nation: in its own interest the European Union – and this applies to

international financial organisations as well – should have called the foundations of Tunisian economic development into question.

Stability and security were – and indeed still are – often invoked to account for European passivity and muteness. This was already the case when sclerotic communist regimes were in power in central and eastern Europe: Western governments feared that even more unpalatable regimes might be waiting in the wings and regarded the leaders in power as the lesser of several possible evils. Similarly the Ben Ali regime was regarded as a bulwark against radical Islam and Tunisia was seen as a haven of stability and secularism in the midst of a turbulent region. But appearances can be deceptive: the apparent stability of Ben Ali's regime, founded on repression, ultimately gave way to instability. And in all this it must be remembered that transitions, however desirable they are, do not necessarily bring about peace and democracy, and certainly not stability. Seen against this background, Europe's invocation of stability and security seems often to have simply been a mask for laziness and cowardice.

What is the practical lesson that the EU might draw from Tunisia's revolution? We should start here from the fact that democracy cannot be imposed from outside. Democracy has to be people's democracy: it can only be achieved from within. But short of imposing democracy from the outside or demanding that the regime introduce democracy, the EU had a small margin of manoeuvre: it could have pointed at economic mismanagement and corruption and forcefully insisted that human rights be respected. After all it was entitled to demand something in return for all the aid and benefits that the EU granted Tunisia. Unfortunately in the absence of strong political will on either side, European support on the one hand was rarely matched by transformations in Tunisia on the other, and decision makers in both Brussels and Tunis contented themselves with superficial technical and commercial reforms and political damage limitation.