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NOVEMBER
2012

TUNISIA: Secular Social Movements Confront Radical Temptations

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One year has passed since the Tunisians held orderly and free elections, the first ever since the country became independent from France in 1956. The coalition government which was constituted soon after and is dominated by the Islamist *Nahda* party has made progress on drafting a new, democratic constitution but it has met strong opposition as it attempts to gag the media and the judiciary. The way in which it has managed the economy has proved very amateurish. As a result, the economy is drifting badly and becoming ever more hostage to politics. Unemployment and the trade deficit are both rising and a never ending series of labour disputes is threatening to derail any hopes of recovery.

The trades union is playing a growing role

Headline news is dominated by the government's attempts to impose censorship on the media, its very lax policy towards hard line Islamists who are never shy of threatening university teachers and rectors, trying to take over mosques and destroying shops selling alcohol. Beyond headline news which often focuses on the Salafists, one key player is gaining power by stealth. The trades union *Union Générale Tunisi-*

enne du Travail (UGTT) was founded in 1946 and has influenced the country's politics and economics ever since. The union boasts 517,000 members, mostly in the state sector – 80 regional offices and 19 different sector groups. During the fight for independence in the early 1950s, UGTT played a decisive role and its charismatic secretary general and founder, Ferhat Hached, was assassinated by the right wing French group *La Main Rouge* in October 1952.

After independence in 1956, the sheer dominance of the ruling *Parti Socialiste Destourien* on public life made UGTT the focus of lively debates if not opposition to government policies. The major social crisis of 1978 and 1984 pitted the unions against the government of the day. In the second instance, the uprising started in the south and spread north to Tunis, as happened in 2011. Two wings have usually vied for influence

at UGTT, one prepared to accommodate the government of the day, the other more inclined to defend the rights of its members in upfront fashion. The union has remained a broad chapel however, its members covering a broad spectrum from hard left to centre right.

The confrontation between UGTT and the *Nahda* led government started in February this year as thousands

Beyond headline news which often focuses on the Salafists, one key player, the trade union, is gaining power by stealth

UGTT's deteriorating relations with the government could greatly influence the outcome of next June's elections

Amnesty International warns that progress on human rights in Tunisia is "being reversed" in a report last October

Although Tunisian Islamists were the enemies most directly target under Ben Ali, many liberals and UGTT members suffered badly during his 23 year old rule

Tunisia's economy is mismanaged and drifting. Average growth of 4.5% since 2000 is not enough to absorb new entrants into the job market

of union members protested at the Islamist tactic of having lorry loads of rubbish dumped in front of UGTT branches in an attempt to stop the union protesting against deteriorating social and economic conditions in Tunisia. On August 14th UGTT supporters clashed with the police in Sidi Bouzid, where the protests that eventually toppled Ben Ali started. UGTT was vehement in its demands that young unemployed Tunisians who had been arrested by the police and beaten up be released. Relations between the trade union and the government have deteriorated sharply since then, fuelled by the latter incapacity or unwillingness to spell out a coherent economic policy and its proximity to businessmen men who were close to the Ben Ali regime. Police repression has not endeared the government to UGTT militants.

Progress on human rights “is being reversed” - Amnesty International

UGTT’s deteriorating relations with the government could greatly influence the outcome of next June’s elections. UGTT played an important role as relay of the protests which resulted in the corrupt ruling family of Ben Ali being ousted from power in January 2011. In the months ahead, it could play an equally important role in ensuring that Tunisia becomes

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a country where different voices are listened to and respected, where the media are allowed to criticise the government of the day without fear of being gagged and where women rights gained after independence are enshrined in the new constitution. UGTT has no truck with efforts currently under way in the constituent assembly to ban any former member of the ruling RCD party or senior government official who held office before January 2011 from holding office. Such a measure would ban over 1m Tunisians from participating in the country’s political life or holding high office. We are fast approaching a watershed in the revolution sparked across many Arab countries by the Tunisian uprising.

Meanwhile violence is escalating in the confrontation between Nahda forces and opposition parties. Last October, Beji Caid Essebsi, Tunisia’s first post-revolution prime minister – who was very critical of UGTT while in office but now seeks their support, called the death of one of his party’s senior officials in violent demonstrations led by *Nahda* supporters a “political assassination” and referred to the “lynching” of Lotfi Nagedh. The party official’s death came as progress on human rights in Tunisia was “being reversed” according to a report published in October by Amnesty International. Last year’s elections were widely praised as representing a model transition towards democracy but new restrictions on freedom of expression, targeting artists, journalists, artists, critics of the government, writers and bloggers is increasing. Reportedly, more and more Tunisians are receiving death

threats on their phones. The destruction just over a month ago of the main room with the catafalque of the Sufi shrine of Sayida Manouba in Tunis by members of a Salafist group fits into a pattern which has seen tombs of Sufi saints destroyed in Timbuktu after the Al Qaeda affiliated Ansar Dine took over Northern Mali.

The minister of the interior Ali Laâraïdh insisted that Lotfi Nagedh had died as the result of a heart attack. Two days earlier state television suggested that the young men who entered the *zaouia* (shrine) of Sayida Manouba were just thieves. UNESCO condemned that act but no member of the government spoke up. The Tunisian authorities are unable or unwilling to protect individuals from attacks by those believed to be affiliated with Salafist groups while the Amnesty report said it had received reports of torture “many of them from protestors who alleged they were beaten during demonstrations, during arrest or in detention centres. A state of emergency in place since the uprising has been repeatedly renewed, most recently till the end of October.”

Burning the American school in Tunis sullied Nahda’s image

The *Nahda* party which was banned before last year’s uprising won a plurality of votes in the elections of October 23rd last year and now rules in coalition with two smaller parties, including the Congress for the Republican Party of President Moncef

Marzouki. The current escalation of violence was sparked by an event which sullied Tunisia’s image of quiet revolution and that of *Nahda* even more: it occurred September 14th 2012 when a mob of supporters of *Nahda* and bearded flag-burning zealots attacked the American mission and burned the American school in Tunis. A videotape showing the paramount leader of Islamists, Rashid Ghannouchi, meeting with the same Salafists who call for foreign investors and tourists to be banned from the country has humiliated a force once seen as unstoppable. The Islamist prime minister, Hamadi Jebali and Rachid Ghanouchi, were further humiliated by the success of the conference called on 16-17th October by UGTT. All the major political forces in the country attended, including Ettakatol, a small party which belongs to the government coalition - except the government and *Nahda* who saw the meeting as a way of circumventing their domination of the process of writing a new constitution.

The recent drift into violence of what has been to date a relatively peaceful transition from dictatorship has confirmed that the Islamists have organisational capacity, popular support and international connections which their opponents appeared to lack. In Tunisia however, the strength of liberal and leftist reaction is becoming more evident by the day. Such forces were gutted by the founder of modern Tunisia Habib Bourguiba and the former dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. Although Tunisian Islamists were the enemies most directly targeted by the latter, many liberals and UGTT members suf-

ferred badly during his twenty three year rule. The strength of their reaction today suggests that many Tunisian men and women are prepared to fight for a modern vision of Tunisia, a country where state and religion are separated, as the country's 1861 constitution proclaimed. Beji Caid Essebsi has succeeded, since *Nidaa Tunes* (the Call from Tunis), the party he founded in July 2012, in pulling badly fragmented liberal and leftist forces together while the Islamists recent missteps and thuggery have eroded their popularity.

Rashid Ghannouchi has never shied away from advocating violence

The calculated exercise in ambiguity of Rachid Ghannouchi – the true powerbroker in Tunisia today, is worth taking a closer look at. He admires both Nasser and the doctrines of Hassan el Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. He is a self professed admirer of the Turkish prime minister and likes to argue that Islam, liberal economic policies and democracy can coexist. Yet, when asked by the *New York Times* at the height of the civil war in Algeria in January 1994 why intellectuals there should be evicted just because they embraced secularist views he answered: “some of these secularists are the devil's advocate, they are Pharaoh's witches. The educated that put their brains and their talent in the service of an oppressive regime have made their own decision. They must bear the responsibility of their choice.” This was tantamount to a licence to murder.

Ahead of last year's first free and fair elections he named the minimum threshold of votes he expected to receive and resorted to threats saying he would not hesitate to order troops into the streets if those votes failed to materialise. Beji Caid Essebsi's behaviour in the run up to last year's elections was exemplary. Ghannouchi has repeatedly stated in recent weeks that *Nidaa Tunes* supporters “were more dangerous than the Salafists” (notably on the private and widely listened to *Shams FM* radio station in Tunis on October 4th). The reaction of the former prime minister to the murder of Lotfi Naguehd was firm but restrained.

Ghannouchi also criticizes the way in which Tunisians mix French and Arabic, thus sullyng as he sees it the language of the Prophet. This defence of the Arabic language which primarily takes the form of an indictment of the use of French must be seen in the context of France's deep complicity with the former Ben Ali regime, its opposition to the bold economic reforms attempted in Algeria in 1989-91 and the exaggerated *parisianisme* of some in the Tunis elite who have consistently ignored their poorer countrymen. His attitude contrasts sharply with that of Algeria's most famous modern writer, Kateb Yacine who proclaimed at the height of his country's violent struggle to throw of French rule in the 1950s: “*le Français est mon butin de guerre.*”

A few months ago, the Tunisian government appointed a former police officer of Ben Ali, Lotfi Touati, to run the state

owned *Assabah* press group, prompting the journalists there to go on strike, some on hunger strike. The first ever general strike of journalists in the history of the country followed last month. Businessmen who were very close to the former *Mafiosi* Ben Ali clan are now advising the government. Twenty thousand new jobs have been created in an already over-bloated civil service and given to cronies of Nahda. Such behaviour does not augur well for the future of free speech and good economic management.

The country's economy meanwhile is drifting badly. Rising unemployment and food prices will radicalise political and social actors in Tunisia. The current account deficit, for the second year running amounts to more than 7.5% of GDP. Although foreign investment has held up well to date, investors, both domestic and foreign are beginning to hold back and capital flight appears to be increasing. Subsidised products such as milk increasingly find their way to Libya while Algerian petrol, cheaper its Tunisian counterpart is increasingly available. The risk of Tunisia turning into a bazaar economy is increasing. Since January 2011, the international community, not least Europe and the US have strongly backed Tunisia. In 2011 the country received \$1.3bn of external financial support. We are far from Ghannouchi's fears of rejection. Although GDP has rebounded by an estimated 2%, that is

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hardly noteworthy when compared with the 1.5% decline of last year. Average growth since 2000 has been a modest 4.5 %, not enough to absorb new entrants onto the job market.

Early last summer the respected governor of the central bank, Mustafa Nabli was sacked at the insistence of the Tunisian president. The Administrative Reform minister Mohamed Abbou resigned because “the government had refused to give him the authority to investigate corruption cases and overhaul the public sector.” The minister of finance, Houcine Dimassi, a member of the Ettakatol and a man considered an independent resigned accusing the government of being “more concerned about winning votes than about the health of public finances.”

Rachid Ghannouchi's exercise in calculated ambiguity is inflicting grievous damage to the management of the economy, which also has to face strong European headwinds – the EU remains Tunisia's major external market. Some foreign companies have closed down factories because strikes and growing insecurity are making life impossible for them. A few Tunisian private firms have been closed down by their owners and moved to Algeria and Morocco. UGTT meanwhile has a difficult balancing act. It has yet to come up with a well thought through economic plan to re-launch the economy but it is mindful that its members which work in the formal sector of the economy have little truck with a growing informal sector which tends to support Nahda. Both far left po-

litical parties and supporters of *Nidha Tunes* have defended UGTT against the government. Repeated attacks by Salafists and the government against UGTT risks provoking further violence. Nahda's official credo is one of economic liberalism and privatisation but, as its sister parties across the Arab world, it has never come up with a realistic platform which addresses the problems of a modern economy.

The high hopes of the revolution of January 2011 have not brought more jobs for many Tunisians, quite the reverse. It has ushered in a period of greater freedom of expression but those gains risk being reversed. No one disputes that Islamists must be able to exercise their rights alongside other political forces – many Tunisians remain fervent supporters of *Nahda*. A primary argument for accepting and even advocating the rise of Islamists in Tunisia, as elsewhere in North Africa is that only they will be able to confront the radicals in their ranks and guide them into the mainstream. The Islamist's lurch between mollifying and confronting the Salafists may be ascribed to their inexperience - or cynicism. But confronting UGTT is most unwise – it is a force to be reckoned with. If Ghannouci, who is the true puppet master of Tunisian politics, alienates UGTT further and shies away from serious economic thinking, Tunisia will enter into uncharted political and economic waters.