

August 8, 2011

Tunisia: The Arab Spring's Pivotal Democratic Example

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With nearly two months to go before constituent assembly elections, Tunisia confronts a long list of challenges to the creation of a democratic system. Expectations for swift and wide-ranging reforms are very high among a population hungry for change after decades of harsh authoritarian rule. Ordinary citizens are eager to enjoy the benefits of meaningful political freedom and economic prosperity, having endured unrelenting repression, mismanagement, and the plundering of resources by a small circle around the family of former president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. The political uncertainty in the wake of the dictator's departure has taken a toll on the Tunisian economy and its tourism sector in particular, on which some 500,000 people in this country of 10 million depend for employment. The ongoing conflict in neighboring Libya is another encumbrance, as it deprives Tunisia of much-needed trade revenue and generates regional instability.

A sense among the Tunisian public that reforms are moving too slowly, combined with difficult economic and social pressures, is leaving the population increasingly frustrated. Advocates of democracy abroad are also watching with concern, as Tunisia is considered a bellwether of the change that has swept the region. Although it is still early in Tunisia's post-Ben Ali period, the country is approaching a pivotal stage in its development that will require patience from the Tunisian public, as well as meaningful support from the world's democracies, the United States and the European Union first and foremost. Shortages of food in sections of the country threaten social stability. But improving these conditions will require keeping the democratic reform process on track, starting with the October elections, which represent the next critical step for Tunisia's democratic development.

A Post-Authoritarian Crossroads

Tunisia was a tightly closed society that is now opening dramatically and with remarkable speed. This profound change does not make the country a democracy, however. Today, Tunisia is best understood as inhabiting a post-authoritarian limbo, with the government facing a daunting imperative to implement a wide range of reforms that carry no guarantee of success. Tunisian society and its institutions are deeply degraded after years of repression, corruption, and mismanagement. A system that developed over the last two decades to accommodate personalistic rule and rampant graft cannot be transformed overnight into a transparent and accountable model of democratic governance.

The institutional handicaps left behind by the Ben Ali regime are outlined in the country's dismal prerevolutionary performance on a broad range of indicators. As of the end of calendar year 2010, the country's [political rights rating](#) in *Freedom in the World*, Freedom House's annual assessment of political rights and civil liberties, was the same as those for Sudan and Chad. Its civil liberties rating was no better, placing it alongside countries such as Qatar, Tajikistan, and Vietnam.

Tunisia's standing in *Freedom of the Press*, which chiefly analyzes the freedom of print and broadcast media, was at the level of the notoriously repressive regimes in Equatorial Guinea, Laos, and Syria. Out of 196 countries examined, Tunisia was [ranked 184th](#).

The prerevolutionary authorities in Tunisia also ensured that politically relevant expression on the internet was under tight control. The country [ranked among some of the most repressive systems](#), including that of China, in *Freedom on the Net*, Freedom House's assessment of the internet and other new communications technologies.

Tunisia was ranked Not Free in each of these indexes, meaning that the system provided virtually no safeguards or guarantees for the freedoms assessed. This challenging starting point for Tunisia's reformers should serve as a sobering reminder of the ground they must cover before the country can begin to meet basic democratic standards. Policymakers in the U.S. and EU should support appropriate pacing of reforms.

Tunisia's Critical Demonstration Effect

Tunisia has already exerted a powerful demonstration effect by virtue of the overwhelmingly peaceful revolution its citizens achieved at the beginning of this year. Since January, the country has largely avoided the toxic politics and violence that has overtaken much of the region. Tunisians can continue this positive role in the postrevolutionary, institution-building phase of development, in the first instance through the conduct of open and fair constituent assembly elections in October. Soundly administered and open elections in Tunisia would have a salutary impact on Egypt's elections, scheduled to be held shortly thereafter, and eventually on other countries in the region that succeed in emerging from upheaval or authoritarian governance to hold elections of their own. Conversely, if the upcoming elections in Tunisia fall short of basic international standards and domestic expectations, they could cast a pall over the country's broader reform ambitions and embolden skeptics in the region and beyond who argue that democracy is untenable in the Arab Middle East. Such an outcome would represent a missed opportunity of truly historic proportions for the people of Tunisia, as well as for the strategic interests of the United States and European Union.

Opening a Closed Society: A Pressing Need for Transparency and Democratic Accountability

The difficult legacy bequeathed by Ben Ali and his cronies presents major challenges for Tunisian society but also clear opportunities for progress toward democratic governance. Institutional change always proceeds slowly, but there is great potential for swift gains in the freedoms of expression and assembly, many of which emerged almost immediately after Ben Ali fled. News media are experiencing an openness that would have been unimaginable when Ben Ali was in power, and citizens have repeatedly mounted demonstrations to air their demands and grievances. These gains are under constant threat, however. The Tunisian authorities can signal their commitment to long-term reform by taking steps to safeguard these freedoms, particularly in the run-up to the constituent assembly elections. The recent adoption of a new press code is a step in the right direction.

A transparent election process will be indispensable for earning the trust and confidence of the Tunisian public, as well as that of the international community. October's constituent assembly elections represent the first of several post-Ben Ali reform milestones. These polls will empower a body whose principal mandate will be to craft a new constitution. Only when this process is complete will parliamentary and presidential elections be held, well into 2012 at the earliest. In the meantime, other reforms—political, economic, and social—must continue.

It will be critical to encourage transparency among Islamist groups participating in the political system, as many observers expect them to enjoy a clear plurality in elected bodies. For democracy to take root,

Islamists must be not only open about their political goals, but also fully committed to democratic norms, including freedom of expression and respect for women and minorities. With these assurances in hand, secularists should welcome Islamist political participation.

Meaningful steps toward greater democratic accountability are important for ensuring that no vestiges of the damaging system of governance forged by the former regime continue to trouble the country. Genuine political reform is also a prerequisite for altering the opaque economic system that grew deep roots during the Ben Ali period, and which enabled the plundering of the country by the president and his associates. Retrograde forces from the old regime remain in large numbers in key ministries, and elsewhere in Tunisian society. They will undoubtedly look to exploit vulnerabilities in the new environment. The danger is less a return to the old system than the resilience of key elements of that system, such as crony capitalism, and its potential to undercut or obstruct progress toward democracy.

Ben Ali's corrupt and politically repressive governance model was destined to reach a dead end. Much of the old order that has plagued the Middle East and North Africa for decades is in the process of passing from the scene. For the authoritarian regimes that persist, it remains unclear whether minor reforms (as in Morocco or Jordan) or brutal repression (as in Saudi Arabia, Syria, or Bahrain) will be sufficient to retain power. In any case, the status quo ante is not an option in Tunisia or in any of the other countries in North Africa or the Middle East that have crossed the threshold of political ferment. It is therefore in the interest of the United States and European Union to craft comprehensive policies, with an eye toward the longer term, that encourage the most free and prosperous outcomes for these societies. A key part of any such policy is the identification of realistic goals that can be achieved in difficult post-authoritarian settings suffering acute economic distress. Tunisia has overthrown its dictator, but as with its neighbors in the region, the true revolution will lie in the institutionalization of democratic standards over time.

Policy Recommendations for the U.S. Government and European Union

Support free and fair elections in October. It is critical to ensure in the transition's near term that basic social and economic needs are met. Food prices have increased significantly, and food shortages in parts of the country threaten social stability. But improving these conditions will require keeping the democratic reform process on track and working toward greater political certainty, starting with the October elections for the constituent assembly, the next pivotal step for Tunisia's democratic development. Meaningful international election monitoring is a key indicator that Tunisian authorities have embraced a transparent electoral process. If the upcoming elections fall short of international standards and domestic expectations, they will undercut Tunisia's broader domestic reform ambitions and prevent the political progress on which the country's economy, including tourism, depends. If they are successful, however, they will enable further advances in Tunisia and play an important role as an example for Egypt and other countries in the region.

Manage expectations at home and abroad. Since Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia in January of this year, Tunisia has been forced to govern on the fly, devising ad hoc measures to address deep systemic deficiencies associated with former president Ben Ali's personality-driven leadership model. So far, the interim authorities have done an admirable job under exceptionally trying conditions. The extensive damage to Tunisian society caused by the Ben Ali regime means that any durable democratic reform effort will require considerable time and the effective management of expectations, both at home and abroad. An important part of this effort must include rapid improvement of the new authorities' ability to communicate reform plans to the Tunisian public. Moreover, words matter. Policymakers and news media should be precise in their use of language and avoid premature talk of Tunisian "democracy," which the country has not yet achieved. According to Freedom House findings as of the end of 2010, Tunisia was among the most politically repressive countries in the world. The institutions created by this regime were decades in the making, and they need to be rebuilt over time.

Seize the openings in a formerly closed society. The abrupt and impressive gains made in the spheres of expression and assembly should be defended through a longer-term strategy that encourages the free

flow of ideas on matters of political and economic consequence. This strategy must include ways to strengthen and diversify the Tunisian policy community, which was stifled over the past quarter century. For example, support for the development of policy institutes and think tanks within Tunisia would provide political leaders with informed analysis and policy innovation well beyond the coming elections.

G-8 should provide critical support. Tunisia's interim government is approaching the Group of 8 with a package of economic and social reforms—the "Jasmine Plan"—next month in the hope of receiving a critical pledge of support from the world's leading advanced economies. This support will help alleviate the damage wrought by a sharp drop in tourism and the negative effect of the Libyan crisis, which has dampened trade and exacted a humanitarian cost on Tunisia. The G-8, which is already engaged, should be responsive to the plan, as its endorsement would send the right signal in advance of the October 23 elections.

Recognize Libya's impact on Tunisia's reform efforts. Violence and instability in Libya continue to jeopardize reform prospects in Tunisia. Support for Tunisian authorities in securing the country's borders and a definitive end to the conflict is critical to Tunisia's economic recovery and to its democratic transition.

ISSUES: Civil Society, Democratic Governance, Elections, Freedom of Association, Freedom of Expression, Human Rights Defense, Rule of Law
REGIONS: Middle East and North Africa **COUNTRIES:** Tunisia

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