Tunisian Democratization: Between Challenges and Opportunities

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FRANCESCO CAVATORTA, FEB 7 2013

The post-revolutionary construction of a new political system in Tunisia is drawing increasing international attention because the country is encountering a number of difficulties that for some analysts are unexpected. In early 2012 for example Alfred Stepan argued that the conditions for a successful transition to democracy and consolidation were certainly in place in Tunisia given that the most important political actors had subscribed to the 'twin tolerations.' In short the secular and Islamist sectors of society, having cooperated prior to the fall of the regime, were in agreement on the type of political system that should replace the autocratic one. Political Islam, as embodied by the *al-Nahda* party, had a substantial degree of democratic credibility and was able to make significant compromises on the structures and institutions of the new Tunisia, subscribing to the idea of civil state rather than an Islamic one, accepting the mechanisms of democracy and defending core individual rights.

For its part, the secular sector of society represented by a number of centre-left parties and a number of civil society associations accepted that the Arab-Muslim identity should become a central tenet of the identity of the new Tunisia and opted largely for the inclusion of *al-Nahda* in the political system without too many difficulties. There are two important indications that testify to the solidity of the compromise in the aftermath of the fall of the regime and in the wake of the October 2011 elections, the first free and fair elections in Tunisia since independence. First, a coalition government between three of the four largest parties was set up. This ruling coalition comprised *al-Nahda* and two centre-left parties. Thus despite their ideological differences and policy preferences, the leaders of these three parties seemed to place the national interest above party interests and coalesced to guide Tunisia through the dangerous waters of transition. This development makes Tunisia a unique case in the post-Arab Spring world. Second, a draft for a new constitution has been widely agreed upon and despite temporary set-backs in the discussions with the different parties disagreeing profoundly on specific aspects of the draft, the next text seemingly enjoys rather widespread support. Thus, at least superficially, scholars such as Stepan correctly point to the overall success of the transition and are optimistic about the consolidation process.

Such optimism however needs to be tempered. The Arab Spring came as a huge surprise for both scholars and policy-makers (Gause, 2012) largely because the academic and political focus of analysis was on 'high politics', namely the way in which the reforms that ruling elites carried out reinforced authoritarian rule (Heydemann, 2007). This seemed to suggest that authoritarianism would be the dominant trait of the Arab world for a long time. The events of the Arab Spring challenged the validity of this analysis and demonstrated that it is equally important to focus not only on what happens at the 'high' institutional level, but to what kind of changes and activities take place below the radar in authoritarian regimes. If one had looked more closely, as some scholars did, to non-traditional forms of political dissent (Chomiak and Entelis, 2012) or to unusual types of resistance (Allal, 2010), it might have been easier to spot the revolutionary climate present in society. In some ways a similar error is being replicated today in Tunisia, where the focus is overwhelmingly on high politics and on the institutional game, with a particular attention being paid to the way in which political parties negotiate their presence in government or in the Constitutional Assembly, or the way in which traditional actors such as the security services or well-known civil society groups behave. This is certainly important and gives an indication of what Tunisia has been able to achieve since Ben Ali left, providing a degree of reassurance that democratisation is not going to be derailed. However, more attention should be paid to what is happening once again below the radar and here the challenges to the canons of

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democratisation and the expectations that derive from them emerge clearly, rendering the optimistic picture more problematic. This is not to say that democratisation is bound to fail, but the outcome of the Tunisian revolution remains more open than it is sometimes acknowledged. There are three issues in particular that one needs to look at more closely. These issues cannot be neatly separated from one another as there are strong linkages between them, but they will be discussed separately for clarity and analytical purposes.

First is the 'youth' question. While the youth was the protagonist of the revolution, it is nowhere to be seen on the institutional scene today. The post-uprising political settlement around the notions of democratic consensus and constitutional politics is the product of ideological and political debates that the leaders in power have had for almost four decades. In particular the historic compromise between *al-Nahda* and the centre-left parties represents the point of arrival for a generation of politicians that first came to prominence in the late 1970s. An old generation of politicians that were marginalised under dictatorship is now in control of the country and while they might be doing a reasonably acceptable job at running it, they have difficulties in representing the demands of the youth, which is increasingly turning towards forms of extremist political engagement such as Salafism or becoming disillusioned and opting out from engagement or becoming active in civil and social activism that is self-limiting in so far as it refuses to engage in politics (Merone and Cavatorta, 2012). The withering away of the youth from institutional politics might prove problematic for the legitimacy of the new political system because it could also lead to a progressive deterioration of the relations between seculars and Islamists.

Closely linked to the issues of youth is the class question. The post-uprising institutional arrangements can be read as the triumph of the middle class over the predatory ruling elites of the Ben Ali period. In this sense the democratic consensus between *al-Nahda* and centre-left parties can be understood as a compromise between a secular Francophone/Francophile middle class and a conservative one that places more emphasis on the Arab-Muslim identity. While this democratic consensus is by no means fully established and there are a number of profound disagreements between the two sides on important issues such as women's rights, it should be highlighted that the socio-economic and political demands of the 'other' Tunisia, the one that is poor, disenfranchised and living in marginality, are taken into very little account. This explains the continuation of social protests, the periodic flaring up of poorer regions and the growing appeal of social activism of both Salafism and leftist trade unionism. Over twenty years ago Di Palma (1990) noted that democratic consolidation could not occur if too many socio-economic demands were made on nascent democratic institutions; and he was very likely correct. However at the same time the Tunisian case demonstrates that a failure to address such concerns might have long-term problematic implications for the legitimacy of a system that is increasingly incapable of meeting the concerns of the 'other Tunisia', which is after all the one that first rose up against Ben Ali.

Finally, is the lustration question. In its quest for stability, the government troika has done little to rid the system of people and structures linked to the old regime. This is most notable when it comes to reform of the security services, which has yet to occur on a satisfactory scale. It is also notable when it comes to dealing with the enormous wealth of individuals and even companies linked to the former regime and who obtained such wealth precisely because they were connected to it. While some prominent businessmen are being prosecuted for corruption and others are still in exile, a significant number of them have been able to find a new 'lease of life' in the new system either by courting *al-Nahda* or by joining the new political formation that opposes it: *Nida Tounes*. Whatever the case, bits of the old regime remain firmly in place further frustrating the actors that feel excluded from the nascent institutions. While coming to terms with the past and the responsibilities of both institutions and individuals for what was committed under the previous regime is difficult for every society, it is even more so in Tunisia today where many of reasons for the revolution are still present.

In conclusion, there seem to be two trends that co-exist in Tunisia today. At the institutional level there is a shared view on how the institutions of the new state should look like and what mechanisms should be employed to exercise political authority. This is very significant in a regional context where compromises between different ideological rivals are increasingly difficult. At the social level there is a profound dissatisfaction with the way in which the revolution has been seemingly' hijacked' and this dissatisfaction comes from the part of society that had traditionally been marginalised and that sees its opportunity for political and social inclusion slipping away. In this context, the conflict between seculars and Islamists is becoming increasingly polarised with all the negative consequences this might

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have on the political system. Which trend will eventually prevail is difficult to predict, but it is clear that addressing pressing socio-economic problems is vital for the success of the transition and for the reconciliation of society.

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