

The Dictator is Dead, God Save the Dictator!

Written by Afshin Shahi

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AFSHIN SHAHI, JAN 24 2011

I visited Tunisia a few days after the presidential election in October 2009. Then, the former President Ben Ali was just re-elected for a fifth term with an 89% share of the vote. During my short stay in Tunis the capital was hosting many “celebrations” run by the state. The drumming echo of the musical bands could be heard from the distance. The streets were decorated with flags and innumerable portraits of the president. The state TV was broadcasting programs, which were entirely devoted to the event. Musicians and artists were doing their best to enthuse the masses. Ordinary people were being interviewed. They were thanking God and expressing their gratitude for the “re-election” of their leader who had been in office since 1987. However, the climate of political repression was prevailing.

Despite the “democratic” appearance, one could not forget Tunisia was still a police state. Initially Ben Ali reached the corridors of power through a coup d'état, removing control from Habib Bourguiba, the founder of the modern Tunisian Republic. Following many other Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) leaders Ben Ali sustained his power through repression, fear, and censorship. Despite some of his progressive social reforms, he hardly tolerated political transparency and prospects of power sharing. Hence, his downfall through the popular protests stunned the world. However, there is still no guarantee for a new chapter in Tunisian politics.

Although the downfall of a dictator has symbolic values, it does not necessarily result in a political transition to democracy. In fact, dictatorships have often reproduced themselves in the MENA. For example, in the so-called Egyptian Revolution the Free Officers Movement led a coup d'état to remove a corrupt monarch. Although King Farouk I was forced to sail away from the country, the repressive nature of Egyptian politics stayed the same. A corrupt monarchism turned to a form of “republicanism” which has produced rulers like Hosni Mubarak.

Even revolutions based on mass participation have not paved the way to democracy in the MENA. The Iranian Revolution in 1979 is a prime example for the revival of autocracy out of public uprising. Therefore, we should not be too excited yet about the downfall of Ben Ali. Undoubtedly, the Tunisian uprising involved a lot of courage and the fate of the overthrown president will keep a lot of dictators in the region awake at night. Nonetheless, there is no sign of a transition yet.

A few hours after Ben Ali was forced to leave the country, his Prime Minister and a preeminent member of the party, Mohammed Ghannouchi, announced to be the acting president of Tunisia. However, his presidential authority did not last more than a few hours and soon another fellow member of the same party Fouad Mebazaa was introduced as the interim president. He has been an indispensable figure in Ben Ali's administration for a number of years. Like Ghannouchi, Mebazaa was an indispensable figure within Ben Ali's administration holding many important ministerial positions. Although, he might be slightly more popular than his former boss, he was still a member of the same party, which has been dominating Tunisian politics for a number of decades. Lately, they have been attempting to distance themselves from the Constitutional Democratic Rally (CDR), but this is only a superficial change. Even by leaving the party, they still have history of active involvements in the previous regime.

Hence, what has happened so far is a mere shift of positions within the same political framework. Although, there has been some political liberalisation, there is no guarantee that there will be a fair and transparent election which the current government promises to hold soon. After all, the same party has been winning every election since the

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creation of the Tunisian Republic. There is always the threat of CDR making short-term tactical compromises in order to regain control. Once security is maximized they may embark on a major crackdown again.

A transitory political 'Glasnost' does not necessarily lead to long term political transparency. In the MENA even the shift of leader within the same family sometimes has coincided with pragmatic 'opening up' policies to smoothen the transitional period. For example, following the death of President Hafiz al-Asad in 2000, Syria experienced a "liberalizing" period, which became known as the "Damascus Spring". However, after autumn 2001, once the succession period was complete, most of the activities associated with Damascus Spring were suppressed by the state.

Today, in Tunisia the army and the security forces are still playing a key role in the unfolding events. Some segments of the army have supported the overthrow of Ben Ali. However, there is no certainty about their future strategic alliances in Tunisian politics. The uncertain role of the army raises a question about the coming election as well. Will the army subordinate to the electoral will or is it going to arrange its own deal with a "suitable" political faction? Furthermore, everything has happened so rapidly and there has not been enough time to build an efficient infrastructure to fill the power vacuum. The oppositional discourse is incoherent and we still do not know which party or coalition could provide a long-term and sustainable strategy for a democratic transition. Hence, it is too early to expect a major shift in Tunisian politics. There is still a possibility of political regress when dictatorship can reproduce itself. If that happens, the current period of liberalisation will only be remembered as a mere "Tunisian Spring" which was short-lived and transitional.

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