

**Tunisia after the Revolution:
Democracy between Stalling and Collapsing**

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*How can I live through another day
Watching my dreams turning to ashes
And my hopes into bits of clay*

(From the song "What Now My Love")

On December 17th, 2010 a perfectly unknown man, who was named Mohamed Bouazizi and who lived in a little-known small town in the centre of Tunisia called Sidi Bouzid, decided to set himself on fire in front of the Governor's office. Unable to get a steady job of any kind, he tried to eke out a living for himself and his family by selling few vegetables that he carried around on a cart, but the police kept confiscating his cart and vegetables because he did not have a licence to be a street vendor. On that particular day, the same scenario was replayed once again, and once again he went to the Governor's office to try to recuperate his belongings and/or get a licence for his trade. But once again, they would not even let him into the building. So he decided to burn himself.

As dramatic as that act of self-immolation may have been, it could have been dismissed as just a suicide attempt by a disturbed young man. In fact, that is how local authorities initially treated the incident. But witnesses who saw and heard Bouazizi just before he was engulfed in flames, as well as other town inhabitants, knew from the outset that Bouazizi was making a political statement in protest of the neglect, marginalisation and oppression from which his town and surrounding areas have been suffering for decades. In fact, the entire south-western part of Tunisia has always been considered as a hotbed of rebellion because it periodically rose up against the government, but successive regimes have been able to quell by force any protest or discontent movements. This time, however, repression was going to fail.

It quickly became evident that Sidi Bouzid was a tinderbox that was just waiting for a spark to ignite it, and Bouazizi provided that spark. Before even firemen arrived on the scene, thousands of people were converging there, chanting anti-government slogans, attacking and burning government buildings, and confronting policemen who rushed out of their barracks in large numbers. The rebellion had started in earnest.

Within hours news about events in Sidi Bouzid spread through Facebook and Twitter. In reaction, riots broke out in neighbouring towns and started moving first northward, and then relentlessly in all directions. On December 27th, they reached the capital Tunis. For the following 19 days the country was in turmoil. Everywhere, crowds demanded adamantly the same thing: “Ben Ali *dégage*,” i.e. get out. Eventually, the ex-President did get out; he fled to Saudi Arabia, taking his family with him. That was on January 14th, the date which was chosen (perhaps unfairly to Bouazizi and Sidi Bouzid) to be the official date of the Revolution.

There are many aspects of the Tunisian Revolution that are remarkable and that will undoubtedly be debated and analysed for years to come. This paper proposes a preliminary discussion of two of these aspects. The first is that the revolution ever occurred in the first place. Both under Bourguiba and Ben Ali Tunisia had gone through a number of episodes of more or less serious unrest, sometimes quite violent, but the regime was always able to quell them and never came under serious threat. So everyone thought that this was just another minor annoyance – a mere flash in the pan – that will be quickly and efficiently dealt with. Of course, events were to prove otherwise, and we will propose an explanation for this exception.

The second remarkable feature of the Tunisian revolution relates to the impact the revolution has had in other parts of the world, most particularly in other Arab countries. As the revolution was still in its early stages in Tunisia, large crowds started occupying streets and plazas in a number of Arab capitals, and within weeks the regimes in Egypt, Libya and Yemen were toppled. These developments called for a re-examination of many previously-held ideas (some of them elevated

to the status of axioms or laws). One such idea is that the Arab world is immune to democracy and will remain forever – along with North Korea and Cuba – the last bastion of authoritarian rule. Another is that even if democratically elected governments are established, they are not likely to last because democracy is incompatible with Islam and cannot take root in patriarchal authoritarian societies such as Arab societies. In other words, the democratization process in Arab countries is neither unavoidable nor irreversible.

In light of what is taking place in Tunisia and other Arab countries, can we say that these ideas have been or will be shown to be wrong? Concerning the first point, it will be argued here that it may have been difficult, or even impossible, to predict *when* the revolution would take place in Tunisia. However, it would not have been difficult, or particularly sagacious, to predict that a revolution *had* to occur, not only in Tunisia but in many – if not all – other Arab countries as well. Revolutions or revolts or upheavals are not perchance events. Rather, they are like active volcanoes; they may smoulder for years without erupting but we can be sure that they *will* erupt one day. In Tunisia and other Arab countries, popular anger had been smouldering for years, and keeping it under a tight lid did not and could not make it go away. Bouazizi merely provided the first breach from which the impatient lava could be released, first in Tunisia and then elsewhere.

With respect to the second point relating to the sustainability of democracy (if and when it is established), its discussion at this point may be premature. Barely a year has gone by since the onset of the Arab Spring. So far some autocratic regimes have been toppled, but others are still in power and are either fighting for their survival or are making pre-emptive concessions to stymie revolts. But whatever the case may be, there has not been sufficient time for any situation to jell, or any solid evidence to emerge indicating the likely outcome of a process that is still underway. Such a viewpoint is well taken: You cannot have an objective evaluation of a situation that has not yet occurred or that has just got under way. Nevertheless, it will be argued that an analysis of the Arab Spring must be undertaken immediately because if we wait for further

evidence to emerge, we might miss an opportunity to influence the course of events. In my opinion, what has taken place so far does not portend a good future for democracy in Tunisia or the rest of the Arab world. In fact, there is a serious risk of having a new form of autocracy replacing the old one. However, it is still possible to avoid such an outcome if proper and timely action is taken.

The paper will be organised as follows: Part I will deal with the root causes of the Tunisian revolution and, more generally, of the Arab Spring. Part II will examine the likely direction that revolutions in Tunisia and elsewhere in the Arab world may take, either towards effective and sustainable democracies or towards new forms of authoritarian rule. Part III will suggest measures that may favour the emergence and growth of democracy on the Southern shores of the Mediterranean.

I – Origins of the Tunisian Uprising

Ten days after Bouazizi set himself on fire, President Ben Ali still believed that he was dealing with a minor incident that foreign media conspired to blow out of proportion. Even when demonstrations were held in Tunis on December 27th, 2010 he refused to acknowledge the existence of a serious situation that needed particular attention. In fact, it has been reported that as he was boarding the plane on his way to Saudi Arabia, he was dismayed at what was happening and did not understand why he was made to flee.

Ben Ali's foreign friends were also taken by surprise when riots broke out in the country. Some of them offered to send equipment for riot control. Others vaguely called for an end of violence. But practically all appeared to believe that the situation would eventually come under control. Such an attitude is not difficult to understand. For twenty three years the Ben Ali regime conveyed an image of Tunisia as a stable, prosperous, moderate and modern country. Foreign countries and international organisations accepted that view quite readily, and went out of their way to confirm it in official declarations and reports. When human rights activists and organisations made claims that the Ben Ali regime was guilty of major

violations of human rights and of crimes against opposition leaders, the claims were denied and their authors punished.

The enemy of our enemy

During the Cold War the American and Soviet camps were in constant competition over friends and allies, and were willing to pay whatever was necessary to attract and keep “Third World” countries in their respective camps. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the war should have ended for lack of an enemy – but it did not. US economic and political interests, particularly in the Middle East, were not completely secure against a renewed activism of Fundamentalist movements here and there, and the intention of some Arab leaders to challenge the existing status quo. For example, Saddam Hussein had declared in February 1990 that after the disappearance of the Soviet Union, the Persian Gulf could fall under the complete control of the United States, and that the Arabs should unite to defeat such a plan. In response, the US launched on January 1991 its first invasion of Iraq. The official reason was to repel Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, but the real reason was, as explained by Zbigniew Brzezinski at the time, to ensure stable supply of Gulf oil at reasonable prices. Then, there were the infamous events of September 11th, 2001 which prompted the US to launch an all-out war on terror in general and Al Qaeda and Qaeda-sponsored terrorist organisations in particular. To insure the success of that operation, the US sought to mobilize as much support as it could.

There was a time when anyone who claimed to be anti-Communist could count on the unwavering support of the US. After the death of Communism the new enemy became Fundamentalism or, more precisely, Muslim Fundamentalism. The immediate consequence was that nearly all Arab regimes declared their full support of the US and proceeded to chase all those terrorists who had been hiding in their midst. Many of the arrested suspects were not even practicing Muslims and had no connexion with terrorist groups, but who was going to quibble with such details?

Interests vs. principles

US foreign policy has been characterised by a clear separation between principles and interests to the point where that foreign policy appeared to be inconsistent. Thus, the United States has a long history of supporting dictatorships, although it presents itself as a champion of democracy. The European Union (EU), on the other hand, has not had a common foreign policy in any area or domain – at least until recently. With respect to the Arab region, Europe tended to follow the US lead when it came to the Middle East, while it tried to play a leading role in North Africa. But here too there is a kind of division of labour whereby the EU members tended to yield to the more ‘relevant’ members, namely, France, Italy and Spain. And what we observe is that these three countries, and most particularly France, as well as the European Commission, tended to give a nearly unconditional support to the autocrats in power. The only institution that would every now and then criticise those autocrats was the European Parliament.

Successive US administrations and European governments tried to justify their policies in various ways. The most common argument is that the Arab regimes in place make an invaluable contribution to the security of Western governments by preventing dangerous elements from migrating illegally to Europe where they might become involved in terrorism or drug trafficking or other illegal activities. The same Western governments might concede that ruling regimes do not always have a good track record in the areas of respect of human rights, accountability or democracy, but they maintain that discreet behind-the-scene pressure is being brought to bear on them to adopt appropriate reforms. They further indicate that they have adopted in the last few years a substantive change in policy whereby they no longer consider Islamist movements systematically as radical or dangerous; instead, they recognise that there are moderate Islamists and they would be willing to open a dialogue with them (it remains unclear what topics the dialogue would deal with). Most of these ideas have come in the framework of programmes such as the US Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) or the EU European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

A change of heart?

Much criticism may be addressed – and has been addressed – to these policies. It is not the purpose here to evaluate those policies or opinions about them, but there is one point that needs to be underlined. American and European policies towards the Arab world are often said to be inconsistent. While it may be true that those policies are inconsistent with values that the US and the EU proclaim as essential considerations when dealing with foreign States, it is *not* necessarily true that they are inconsistent in the sense that they vary with time and space. Some might reject this view as contrary to observed facts and to a certain extent, they would be right. As mentioned earlier, the initial reactions from Western capitals when the Tunisian uprising was taking place were either supportive of Ben Ali, or cautiously noncommittal (e.g. no to violence, there should be negotiations, etc.), or pretending that nothing important was taking place. The same trend was to be observed later on in the case of Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen or Morocco. Then, when it became evident that the protesters would accept nothing short of the departure of the targeted dictator, the latter's erstwhile supporters abandoned him or even forced him out of power. However, one position taken in one country is not necessarily repeated elsewhere even when the situations are nearly identical. To confuse matters even further, some dictators repressed violently popular uprisings without eliciting any reaction in Western capitals.

At first glance this behaviour may appear inconsistent, but the inconsistency depends upon where the observer stands. For a third party observing the two protagonists (the concerned dictator and his foreign patrons), the discrepancies are evident. For the concerned dictator, he probably felt betrayed when his friends turned into tormentors. But from the point of view of Western governments their stands concerning each Arab uprising are not at all inconsistent: in fact, they are quite consistent in that they all serve the national interest.

This statement should not be taken as a criticism of the West. In fact, one can venture to say that Western governments are to be congratulated

for doing what any democratic government is expected to do, namely, defend the interests of electors and of the nation. On the other hand, one can – should – criticise Arab rulers whose decisions have not only served foreign interests but have also been detrimental to the national interests. When some of those rulers were overthrown, the rebels had hopes that the new leaders would change this approach to foreign policy. Contrariwise, Western governments would want a continuation of the status quo that had served their national interests for decades, and would most probably consider any attempt to change that status quo as a serious threat to national security. Therefore, one would not be surprised if those governments should wish to see in power new regimes that would not create complications in international relations by introducing radical changes in what have become acceptable inter-state procedures and practices. It is on the basis of this premise that we should examine current and future relations between the Arabs and the West.

II – Where do we go from here?

On January 14th, 2011 Zine el Abidine Ben Ali fled the country. Immediately, the President of the National Assembly took over as acting President (in conformity with the Constitution) and appointed a Prime Minister whom he charged with forming a provisional government to deal with current business and prepare for legislative and presidential elections.

Some of the early decisions taken by the interim government include:

- Abolition of the (1956) Constitution;
- Proclamation of a general amnesty and liberation of all political prisoners;
- Reinstitution of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, of assembly and of the press;
- Authorisation to form political parties (under certain conditions) and other types of associations.

The impact that these measures and other subsequent ones have had on the political, economic and social situation of the country continues

to be felt to this day. There is no doubt that these measures were at the core of the demands of the people who overthrew the dictatorship. However, it is a well known fact that a good medicine can have negative effects if administered in excessive doses. This is, in effect, the situation in which the country found itself. Having lived under authoritarian rule for over fifty years, people wanted to exercise rights which they had never enjoyed. However, they may not have realised that democracy does not mean anarchy, and that the right to free expression implies necessarily a duty to listen to others expressing themselves. At any rate, the measures taken towards establishing democracy have had two consequences that are sufficiently important to deserve special attention: the emergence of self-proclaimed leaders and defenders of the Revolution, and the unreasonable and counter-productive proliferation of political parties.

Opportunism writ large

Bouazizi's sacrifice was not premeditated, and the ensuing marches were spontaneous and under no visible leadership. The uprising in Sidi Bouzid was not reported in the official media for several days; news about it spread only through the Internet, and as soon as people learned the news, they took to the streets without the prompting of any person or organisation. Yet, when Ben Ali fled the country, several individuals and organisations claimed responsibility for that event.

Political prisoners were freed. Most of them were members of the Islamist movement known as Nahdha, since other political activists had managed to leave the country to escape arrest, or else were co-opted by the regime as a façade opposition. Those who were forced into exile returned home and were received as heroes. Of course, they all paid tribute to Bouazizi and other martyrs of the revolution and swore to do their utmost to ensure the success of the revolution.

But as time went by, the attitude and the discourse of some of these opposition leaders started to change subtly – not to say surreptitiously. It appears as if those whose very presence as political leaders on the liberated scene of Tunisia would not have been possible without the

Revolution, wanted to suggest that the Revolution would not have taken place if it had not been for them. This suggestion became particularly strong during the campaign for the election of the Constituent Assembly (I shall return to that election shortly).

In any case, the contest that was taking shape purported to identify those who are genuine and legitimate defenders and protectors of the revolution, those who are mere opportunists who want to use the revolution to serve their narrow private interests, and those who are outright counterrevolutionaries who seek to resuscitate the Ben Ali regime. Needless to say, those claims and counterclaims, given their political character, did not have to be based on evidence, so that one is tempted to take them as humorous entertainment rather than submit them so serious analysis if it were not for the grave consequences that they could have on the targeted individuals.

Let a hundred parties blossom

Freedom of association is an essential element of democracy. It was therefore natural that the first provisional government decided quite early to legalise existing opposition parties and to allow the creation of new political parties (provided that they respect the stipulations of the law on associations of May 1988).

Prior to January 14th there were eight ‘opposition’ parties that were officially recognised, six of which being represented in the National Assembly elected in October 2009 (now dissolved). At present, there are more than one hundred parties registered with the Ministry of the Interior. For many commentators, this proliferation is quite natural and had already been observed in many countries in Europe and elsewhere that went through similar transitional periods; in time, most of these parties will wither away for lack of members. In any case, citizens who had just overthrown a dictatorship would reject any limitation to their fundamental freedoms. Finally, a large number of parties can create no harm and can even have many benefits for society. After all, when as notorious a dictator as Mao Zedong comes out in favour of “letting a

hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend,” on the basis that this would be the best “policy for promoting progress in the arts and the sciences and a flourishing socialist culture in our land,”¹ how can any democrat argue otherwise?

There is no doubt that pluralism in general, and a multi-party system in particular, are characteristic features of a democracy. However, theory and practice indicate that a large number of parties may result in instability and may even lead to new forms of tyranny, especially in parliamentary systems. The current situation in Tunisia resulting from the elections of October 2011 illustrates this point.

Elections of the National Constituent Assembly

The decision having been made to abandon the existent constitution, it became necessary to elect an assembly to draft a new one. An independent commission called *Instance Supérieure Indépendante des Elections (ISIE)* was appointed to organise and oversee the entire electoral process, and a date was set for the elections (the initial date of July 24th was changed to October 23th). The decree calling for the election specified that the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) was to have a term of one year from the date of its first session, and that in addition to drafting a new constitution, it would also serve as the nation’s parliament.

From the outset most of the players chose to ignore the rules of the game. Practically all candidates to the NCA conducted a campaign as if they were running for a legislature rather than for a constituent assembly. Instead of presenting their views on the content of the new constitution (branches of government, separation of powers, form of the executive ...), candidates presented programmes for providing employment, raising incomes, improving health services and other similar issues.

This is not to say that these are unimportant issues, but they are not directly relevant to this particular election. Consequently, orienting voters’

attention to side issues could be considered as a form of deception. There were many other instances of irregular or unethical behaviour, such as promising housing, free health care and employment to all citizens, or declaring that not voting for a particular party would be a sinful act, or offering bribes, or refusing to identify sources of financial support. But these are not unusual practices, even in well-established democracies, and their impact on the final outcome was probably minimal.

At any rate, the electoral commission ISIE set the number of seats in the NCA at 217 and validated 1,517 lists (slates) containing 11,686 candidates competing for those seats (voters choose slates, not individual candidates). On election day there were long lines of people who waited for hours to cast their ballot. It was clear that people were eager to participate in the first free election ever to be organised in the country. At some polling stations the affluence of voters was so important that they had to remain open well beyond closing time.

The official results as published by ISIE are summarised in Table 1. Without going into a detailed analysis of those results, one can underline the following points:

- The Islamist party Nahdha obtained the largest number of seats (89 out of 217 or 41 percent) without, however, winning an outright majority. This victory is quite significant: Nahdha slates received nearly as many votes as all other party slates combined (1.5 million vs. 1.6 million), and won almost as many seats as its four main competitors (89 vs. 91). However, the landslide that was expected – and that was possible – did not materialise.

Nahdha started with several advantages over its competitors. First, it enjoyed a wide recognition across the country. For decades it had been a well known activist movement and an important actor on the political scene. Secondly, the movement's leaders, members and supporters have been victims of constant persecution and spent years in jail under difficult physical and psychological conditions. Consequently, they were considered as martyrs who deserve to occupy the leadership positions

Table 1: National Constituent Assembly Election Results

PARTIES	VOTES		SEATS	
	Number	% ^a	Number	%
Nahdha*	1 501 320	37.04	89	41.01
Congrès pour la République*	353 041	8.71	29	13.36
Pétition populaire	273 362	6.74	26	11.98
Ettakatol*	284 989	7.03	20	9.22
Parti démocrate progressiste	159 826	3.94	16	7.37
<i>14 other parties that won 1 to 5 seats each</i>	<i>594 042</i>	<i>14.65</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>13.36</i>
<i>Independent lists</i>	<i>62 293</i>	<i>1.54</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>3.69</i>
<i>Lists that won no seats</i>	<i>1 290 293</i>	<i>31.83</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>--</i>
Cast votes	4 308 888	51.98 ^b	217	100.00
Registered voters	8 289 924	--	--	--

* Governing coalition
^aTotal exceeds 100 due to rounding
^bVoter turnout, i.e. actual voters/registered voters

Source: Instance Supérieure Indépendante des Elections (ISIE)

from which they had been unfairly kept away. Thirdly, the values and principles that they defend (equity, integrity, compassion ...) are shared by most citizens, although presenting them as features of Islam rather than as universal values is questionable. Lastly, Nahdha has been able to mobilise sufficient human and financial resources to establish direct contact with citizens in all corners of the country, and to provide immediate and concrete assistance to all those who needed it, whether it is covering expenses for a wedding ceremony, or a sheep for a religious holiday, or cement for a new room in the house.

Therefore, the surprise was not that Nahdha won so many seats, but rather that it did not win much more. In a sense, this outcome is rather reassuring for the future. The most logical conclusion that one can draw is that Nahdha's support does not go much beyond what it has received, and that at the next election (when and *if* it takes place) it is not likely to get a better score. In fact, it may even

suffer a decline if its performance in office remains as poor as it has been so far, and if the opposition succeeds in revising its strategy.

- The second lesson that can be inferred from the election is that the opposition did not lose the election so much as it refused to accept the victory granted by the electors. What the figures show is that the number of seats obtained by slates other than those affiliated with Nahdha is 128, which is largely sufficient for a direct control of the NCA. So the question is: Why is Nahdha not in the minority where its score should have confined it? The answer is quite evident: The opposition did not go into the game as a team but as a hodgepodge of individual players with different levels of skills, experience and visibility. The result of the confrontation was thus determined in advance.

As voters tried to choose among the multitude of slates in the running, they found themselves confronted with hundreds of programmes, proposals and ideas. Moreover, the platforms presented were so similar that it was almost impossible to distinguish between them or to identify them with a specific party or slate. In fact, when we analyse the declared ideology or manifesto of the various parties, we find that they can be aggregated under four or five major labels: the socialists/social democrats, the liberals/centrists, and the conservatives (including the Islamists). Had the dozens of parties chosen to find common denominators around which they could coalesce, the political landscape and the election outcome might have been quite different.

Recent developments do not indicate whether the non-conservative parties (i.e. parties other than Nahdha and to its left) have drawn the correct lessons from their electoral counter-performance. On the one hand, several initiatives have been taken by parties to merge, although few concrete results have been achieved so far. On the other hand, some of the existing parties are torn by internal dissent and threaten to implode. At present, there is little indication as to which trend will prevail – the centripetal or the centrifugal. Of course, the next elections are still months away but the concerned parties should

realise that a new configuration of the party system needs to be in place well ahead of that event.

- The third lesson to emerge from the NCA election relates to the so-called wasted ballots or votes that were cast but did not translate into seats in the Assembly. Tunisia opted for the electoral method called the closed party list proportional representation, and the method of the largest remainder for allocating seats among winning lists. This approach is said to have the advantage of offering electors the possibility of finding a slate or a party that comes closest to their opinions or views, and providing each slate with an opportunity to have access to the body to be elected. However, this advantage is not likely to materialise when the number of competing lists becomes too large – as was the case in the NCA election.

In any case, electors who were not already committed to Nahdha were faced with three alternatives. They could choose to support one of the ‘historical’ opposition parties (CPR, Ettakatol, PDP); some 800,000 voters did so and those three parties won 65 seats. But a large segment of the electorate became disenchanted with these parties (for a variety of reasons that space does not allow to discuss), and opted for the alternative of looking elsewhere. However, this option presented a certain risk. One would have to make an educated guess that a vote for a preferred list would not be wasted if that list fails to obtain enough votes to win a seat. Nearly 1.3 million voters took that risk – and ended up being disenfranchised! Many of them probably came to regret not having joined the group that chose the third alternative of sitting out the election – a group to which few analysts or politicians paid any attention despite its size (close to 3.9 million citizens).

Back to square one?

The Tunisian revolution is only fourteen months old, and the first democratic election took place barely five months ago. Furthermore, the process that started on December 17th, 2010 is not over yet, and the period that started on November 22nd, 2011 when the newly elected Constituent

Assembly held its first session, is a transitory period that should last one year. Therefore, it may be premature to make any sensible evaluation of what has taken place, much less to make credible projections about future developments. Nevertheless, there are some unmistakable trends that cannot be ignored, and they should push us to be concerned, if not alarmed, about the future of democracy in Tunisia.

A fact that cannot be contested is that Nahdha won a plurality of seats in the Constituent Assembly. But what *can* be contested is how Nahdha interprets and uses this fact. Members of this party claim that voters have given it a mandate to carry out its programme, and democracy requires that it be given an opportunity to do so. This is not correct. Nahdha simply does not have enough votes to act on its own. Furthermore, the only legal and binding mandate of *all* the parties elected to the NCA is the one defined in the decree calling for the election of the Assembly, namely, to write a new constitution as a primary task and to carry out other clearly defined secondary functions.

Another contention that may be disputed concerns the degree of representativeness that Nahdha thinks it has. First, it must be kept in mind that plurality is different from majority. Secondly, a score of 37 percent of the votes may appear important when compared with the scores of other parties, but it becomes less so reported to the entire electorate, including electors who did not vote. Consequently, Nahdha does not represent 37 percent of the people, as it likes to proclaim, but merely 18 percent of the registered voters or 15 percent of the Tunisian population.

In addition to dismissing such arguments as pure sour grapes, Nahdha has been waging a deliberate campaign to denigrate critics and opponents or to divert attention to other issues and artificially created controversies.

Another cause of concern is the behaviour of the other political parties both inside and outside of the NCA. As soon as the election returns were in, Nahdha called on all 'true patriots to join it in undertaking the exalting and nonpartisan task of writing a constitution that meets the expectations of the valorous martyrs of the Revolution.' Two parties (CPR

and Ettakatol) that were considered as liberal accepted the invitation. After days of negotiations an agreement was made whereby the three parties would form a coalition inside the NCA, and CPR would get the Presidency of the Republic, Ettakatol the Chair of the NCA, and Nahdha the Premiership in the provisional government to be issued from the NCA (with some ministries to go to the two partner parties).

This 'deal' angered many of those who voted for CPR and Ettakatol as well as members of the parties' leadership who denounced the 'unnatural' alliance with Nahdha. At the same time, other non-religious parties and various segments of civil society felt that there was a clear and present danger of a return of authoritarianism. Everyone was aware that Tunisia could become another example of countries where democracy came only to kill democracy.

The country is living a period of great instability. After more than fifty years of oppression, all want to air their grievances. Every victim of every form of oppression or injustice wants immediate and full reparation. Every form of pressure is used to ensure the satisfaction of demands. Wild strikes, demonstrations, marches, sabotage, and naked violence have become daily occurrences. The result is that the economy is practically at a standstill. Unemployment is increasing, state coffers are nearly empty, foreign currency reserves at the Central Bank are dwindling at an alarming rate. Investments have stopped.

It is true that all revolutions are followed by periods of instability and even chaos, and there is no reason that Tunisia should be an exception. In addition, many countries (Arab and non-Arab) have expressed their commitment to the democratisation process and pledged moral and financial support to help the country as it goes through this delicate transitional period. But the fact of the matter is that no concrete relief has been felt, nor are there any signs that it is forthcoming.

Tunisia finds itself in the role of Sisyphus: it must keep pushing the rock of democracy up the hill. At the end of the journey, it will have to ensure that the rock does not fall back to the bottom but while on the way,

it cannot stop for too long. Democracy is too weighty to be held at a standstill for too long; it must keep moving towards its final destination or it will go back to its initial stage of dormancy in the valley of autocracy.

A short letter sent by a citizen to a local newspaper provides a fitting description of the current national mood (excerpts translated from French by the author).

Fellow citizens,

What our country is going through is not a fatality. It is a disease that we must fight. Confronted with the incompetence of politicians in general, and of the opposition parties in particular, civil society and all citizens of goodwill have become the last fence to stop the advance of Islamist fascism...

I urge you to denounce plots being carried out against our unity. We must spread our revolution to our brothers who continue to live under the yoke of autocrats...

I urge you to remain vigilant. Let us not be naïve; religious parties are taking us – in small but incremental steps – towards a theocracy. I urge you to save the Revolution of 14 January. The motherland is in danger, surrounded by cowards who operate in the dark. We must protect it.

Today the world is watching us. Tomorrow History will judge us.

Slim Belhassen, La Presse, 6 March 2012, p. 8



(Endnotes)

1 Mao Zedong (1957): On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People (February 27, 1957), 1st pocket ed., pp. 49-50