

Tunisia: a chance for democracy

Written by: Álvaro de Vasconcelos

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In the light of the recent popular uprising in Tunisia that has culminated in President Ben Ali's flight from the country, the EU is being called upon to actively support democratic transition in Tunisia and to radically change its policy of supporting the status quo in the South Mediterranean. Limitations in the EU's policy have been visible in the security-driven approaches linked to the fight against terrorism that have led European leaders to shore up regimes whose legitimacy is compromised. Europe's shortcomings in this regard have also been reflected in the prioritising of economic development at the expense of political reforms. The Union for the Mediterranean must be revisited in this light, and a new impetus given to the neighbourhood policy and the communitarian approach of support to democratisation in the light of the recommendations made by a number of experts and the Commission for the Barcelona Summit of 2005.

The unrest in Tunisia started as an explosion of anger and frustration over a dramatic rise in unemployment and a rapidly deteriorating economic situation, driving thousands onto the streets to protest against corruption and demand work and a decent wage, in defiance of the regime and fierce police brutality. As is now clear to all, the protest movement swiftly took on a momentum of its own and developed into a call for widespread political and social change.

Ben Ali's regime clung to power for over two decades thanks to a combination of a moderately successful economic performance and the constantly trumped stability card. The regime portrayed itself as the sole guarantor of security and a peaceful society, untainted by the horrors of, for example, neighbouring Algeria in the 1990s. This was achieved through fierce repression of the meekest attempts at opposition – Tunisia was conspicuous among its Maghreb neighbours by the total absence of even a vague semblance of freedom of the press – whether with Islamist leanings or not. As with other Arab regimes, maintaining a fictional bulwark against the spread of radical Islam whatever the political and social price can only be sustained at the cost of ruthless and indiscriminate oppression. Resorting to violent repression was the regime's first reaction to try to stop the protest. It fatally miscalculated, however.

First, the magnitude of the social crisis had dealt a lethal blow to the regime's legitimacy.

Second, and more importantly, it rid Tunisian society of the fear that had paralysed it over the last twenty years. The coverage of events provided by Al Jazeera and the internet, both so often reviled by the Tunisian regime and others of their ilk, made up for the lack of a Tunisian free press.

Third, Tunisia joined other North African countries in demonstrating that it possesses a vibrant civil society, spearheaded by trade unions, human rights and lawyers' associations.

A window of opportunity?

The much-praised Tunisian 'economic miracle' revealed its inherent fragility as it started to crumble when the country was hit by the aftershocks of the euro-crisis. This provided the backdrop for social revolt. The 4.5% growth rate of recent years was, according to Tunisian experts, 2.5% below what would have been enough to create jobs for each year's 85,000 new entrants to the job market. The government found itself powerless too to shore up the economy against the ripple effects of the slump in European demand which quickly depressed the more vulnerable south-east, where demonstrations started. Growth was slashed by virtually one third and inflation increased, in particular for basic commodities (government figures for 2010 put growth and inflation at 3.4% and 4.5% respectively). This, coupled with corruption on an unimaginable scale (leaked US cables give a dauntingly accurate picture), quickly blew away the 'miracle' to reveal the harsh reality behind appearances. A potentially explosive social situation is not just specific to Tunisia but a common characteristic of most if not all Arab southern Mediterranean countries. In Algeria, for instance, unemployment among university graduates currently stands at 21.4% and real growth dropped in 2010 to just 2.2%, well below the requisite level to cater for the employment needs of those arriving on the labour market.

The illusion that intrinsically fragile economic development can be a substitute for political reform – the sole guarantor of long-term stability – must be abandoned once and for all. This is why the window of opportunity that social revolt has opened for democratic reforms in Tunisia should be taken seriously. But in order for this window to stay open, it is vital that the process be regarded as one of democratic transition and that the lessons of the post-electoral debacle in Algeria in 1992 are fully learnt. Many conditions for success exist: an educated youth craving for change; civil society organisations with strong links to their European counterparts; trade unions who under the pressure of their grassroots members have finally renounced their allegiance to the regime; and an army that has refused to kill unarmed civilians (and was thus instrumental in persuading Ben Ali to leave the country). The army has guaranteed the initial stages of the transitional period (including by offering protection to civilians from militiamen on the rampage) and has sided, so far, with the forces for change. There is also a moderate Islamist opposition which is talking to other opposition forces and whose support in free elections would be nothing as extensive as to allow it to become the leading political force. The conditions for failure are also there, however: an extremely powerful and militarised police force and armed militias intent on creating a situation of chaos; the determination of the ruling party, the RCD, to dominate the political process in order to stay in power and to maintain control of the economy; and a ruling class that has grown accustomed to excessive privileges and that will cling to them at all cost. But Ben Ali's RCD party are mistaken if they think that they can rely on cosmetic reforms to perpetuate their grip on power. Tunisian civil society has awakened from the lethargy induced by long years of authoritarian rule, and is unlikely to settle for anything short of democracy; its organisations will be closely monitoring how the transitional situation develops – something that the European Union should also be doing.

How the EU should respond to the crisis

Faced with the current crisis in Tunisia, Europe and the EU can in fact do a lot.

First, by engaging directly with both Tunisian civil society and the opposition movement to facilitate democratic transition, offering help and assistance and monitoring every step of the process. Here, the example of the Orange Revolution could serve as an inspiration for the direct involvement of European and EU leaders (both in the institutions and capitals).

Second, the EU must make it clear, with the support of the United States, that any attempt by Tunisia's neighbours to interfere with internal developments is unacceptable. Gaddafi's speech in support of Ben Ali after he had fled the country must, in that light, be condemned unequivocally.

Third, the EU must indicate what the rewards for meaningful (as opposed to cosmetic) reform will be for Tunisian society. At a minimum, these should consist of an emergency package to help them out of the current situation of acute crisis and fast-tracking of a special 'advanced status' if democratisation succeeds.

Events in Tunisia have presented Europeans with a unique opportunity to uphold their values and, most importantly, to regain the credibility they have lost with the Tunisians and Mediterranean societies in general. The accomplishment of democratic transition in Tunisia is of vital importance to Europe. All the necessary steps to ensure a successful outcome must be taken. Rushing to organise presidential elections under an RCD interim president, an RCD prime minister and several RCD ministers, and a totally RCD-dominated parliament before the opposition has had a chance to organise itself would risk simply perpetuating the RCD's stranglehold upon Tunisian society and kill any chance of real change. After years of oppression, the opposition needs time to organise itself for the coming political battles. The formation of strong political parties, furthermore, is essential to the success of any democratic transition.

A successful democratic transition in Tunisia would dispel the fears of democracy in North Africa that prevail in the European political establishment. The social revolt in Algeria and the demands for social justice, so far stifled under the army's continued repression, might be given a new impetus if change is given a real chance in Tunisia. Reforms in Morocco could possibly be stepped up as well. In Egypt, the post-Mubarak era will open a debate in which dynastic rule is challenged. It is time to put an end to the pervasive fear of democracy in North Africa that exists within Europe. There must be a break from the stagnant mindset whereby authoritarian, so-called 'secular' regimes – however corrupt and oppressive – are seen as a bulwark against the radical Islamists. It is no longer tenable to view democracy as fostering stability in the eastern neighbourhood but as a source of instability in the southern neighbourhood.

Heralding a new era of democracy in the Maghreb?

The Tunisian uprising could signal the beginning of the end of the 'Arab exception' and the start of a new era of democracy. The scope and scale of the Tunisian protest movement that ultimately forced Ben Ali to step down challenge the authoritarian *status quo* in North Africa; rulers that have perpetuated their grip on power for decades are likely to feel threatened. This explains – but does not excuse – Gaddafi's statement to the effect that

Tunisia would do well to bring back its former ruler. The unprecedented 'bottom-up' demand for change in Tunisia may be the detonator of an era of democratic transition in North Africa, in particular in the Maghreb – a process that the European Union has a vested interest in actively supporting. Moreover, it is in a position to do so. This crisis calls for a radical overhaul of EU Mediterranean policy. Democratic transition should be reinstated as a priority, as so many authoritative voices have been urging especially since the Barcelona Declaration was signed in 1995.

A democratic Maghreb has suddenly been given a chance, however slim, of materialising before the close of the current decade. The Euro-Mediterranean community of democratic states, based on shared prosperity, peace and democracy, as proposed by a number of experts in 2005, can yet be proven to be not a pipedream but a credible objective.

This means rethinking not only the neighbourhood policy, in a more political sense, but also calling into question the basic concept of the Union for the Mediterranean, which was built on the conviction that there was no scope for political reforms and that economic cooperation alone should be the basis of Euro-Mediterranean relations. Instead the approach put forward by the European Commission in 2005 in its report to the Barcelona summit, with a specific programme to support political pluralism through the active promotion of 'a fair and competitive political environment, including fair and free elections', should be advocated. This should be reaffirmed as the main objective of the EU's Mediterranean policy. Coherence demands that it must be affirmed as the policy of the EU institutions and capitals alike, in particular those of southern Europe. At a moment like this, the European Union cannot shy away from its responsibilities.

About the author: Álvaro de Vasconcelos is the Director of the European Union Institute for Security Studies in Paris since May 2007. Prior to this, he headed the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (IEEI) in Lisbon, of which he is a co-founder, from 1981 to 2007 where he launched several networks including the Euro-Latin American Forum and EuroMeSCo. As well as being a regular columnist in the Portuguese and international press, he is author and co-editor of many books, articles and reports, notably in the areas of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Euro-Mediterranean relations and on the theme of world order.