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OCCASIONAL ANALYSIS:

TUNISIA / The Tunisian Revolution... A model to follow?

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The liberty of a people freed from their chains after decades of repression, is a wondrous, joyous affair. Tunisia today, just weeks after recovering its freedom following 23 years of dictatorship, is still a country of joy, its cities' streets filled with hopeful passionate citizens, abuzz with the unusual sound of free speech. Bookshop windows are filled with hitherto banned books; the regime's feared henchmen are being rounded up; and the once omnipresent images of the dictator beaming down on his people, like some Big Brother over every city square and major street corner, are gone or in tatters. A revolution has taken place, so the journalists repeat once and again, and apparently a sweet-scented one too.

But revolutions are complex, complicated affairs and there are already clear signs that the revolutionary euphoria of some is beginning to run headfirst into the vexation of others. Revolutions are, almost by definition, successful affairs, in the sense that after doing away with the old, they replace it with something new. But getting to that something new is a protracted and messy business, with many ups and downs. In this sense, Tunisia's revolution is far from over. For although the dictator has departed, his arrest warrant published and his party dismantled, the mainstays of his system remain. Ben Ali himself may be gone forever, but Tunisia's authoritarian regime, which he inherited in 1988, is in fact, far older and more stable than him, and certainly far too deep-rooted to topple in just a few weeks. More worryingly yet, what comes next is in the case of Tunisia is unsure. Given the freedom movement's lack of leadership or political programme, it is anyone's guess. So, this "revolution" if it is one, may end in a democracy but it could also end in something far worse, and not necessarily because, as the mobs have been clamouring, their revolution could be stolen. But questions of democracy or more authoritarian alternatives are still far off. Tunisia's more immediate future will ultimately depend on which side emerges victorious among those in favour of a transition and those, like the mob, who want an immediate *tabula rasa*. The example of Iraq and the chaos that ensued following *debaathification* should still be too fresh in everyone's mind to advocate going down that path.

But while a transition is a better alternative, it is useful to remember that smooth revolutionary transitions are the exception rather than the rule. Portugal's Carnation revolution is probably the only case in modern times of a transition that was not both extremely disorderly and extremely violent, and even it lasted two full years. In fact, the norm is alternating stages of enthusiasm, freedom, disillusionment, infighting, repression and bloodshed. Dire economic straits are also par for the course. Tunisia's transition, after its rocky start, is, unfortunately, right on target. As the crowds have clamoured for Ben Ali's ministers to go, and the interim government has made concession after concession, struggling for its own survival, the transition has come perilously close to collapsing into one of those darker stages.

What is clear is that Tunisia needs a transition government its people can trust. But, as educated Tunisians recognise it also needs one capable of governing and restoring credibility to the country fast. Therein lies the problem. After decades of decimating any opposition, the only figures with the competence and know-how necessary for doing just that, are those associated, or once associated, with the hither-to ruling party, the RCD. Even the so-called "legal" opposition is untried, unknown by the population and in many eyes, little better than the RCD, given that being "legal" meant serving Ben Ali's purposes. While it may yet prove true that the supposedly spontaneous protests that brought down the dictatorship were in fact sponsored by interested parties, for now, the

protesters remain leaderless. The terrible consequence of this is that, without capable leaders of their own, the mob's action is limited to street protests, unable to play a constructive part in any transition. Indeed there is a distinct possibility that the revolution will fizzle out, not because it has been 'stolen' by stalwarts of the *ancien regime*, but because those who made it happen – mainly those Tunisians left behind by Ben Ali's economic policies – have not been capable of transforming their protests into coherent, workable political project.

Whither Tunisia? For now, the ostensible plan is that a renovated transition unity government, purged of its RCD constituents, will lead the way forward towards elections, both presidential and legislative within the next six months. Although the Constitution requires presidential elections within two months of Ben Ali's departure, consensus from most parties seems to dictate now that this is insufficient time for credible political parties and personalities to mobilise. According to this vague plan, it is the transition unity government that will pave the way towards a new democratic Tunisia.

This plan however, is seriously flawed. In order for the country to undergo a democratic transition, a series of major reforms need to be made regarding the constitution, which form of government the country will adopt, not to mention national reconciliation. By their very nature, such reforms need be taken with the broadest possible consensus and in a totally non-partisan way. The transition government does not and cannot fit these requirements. Its role must be limited to caretaking: carrying out day-to-day tasks of governing limiting decision-making to what is necessary so that the country does not descend into chaos.

To undertake the necessary reforms, two extraordinary bodies should be created. Firstly, some sort of Council of Elders, made up of respected, neutral personalities from judicial, academic, civil-society, even perhaps, political backgrounds (on the condition that they be publicly dissociated from the former regime), with the task of proposing necessary reforms and overseeing the transition. Secondly, an elected Constituent Assembly, representative of every sector of Tunisian society, tasked with agreeing on and adopting a new constitution. There is some positive talk on both fronts. On the one hand, consultations would seem to be taking place with at least two elder statesmen from the Bourguiba era, as well as several well-respected university professors with the intention of forming just such a Council of Elders. On the other, the judicial commission tasked with proposing reforms has already voiced its support for a Constituent Assembly.

While this is positive talk it may ultimately prove no more than talk. If neither of these institutions are ultimately formed, these duties will fall to the country's political parties, both those existent now and the new ones that will inevitably be formed in the coming months. Right now, Tunisia must begin developing a more robust set of political parties capable of delivering these reforms and of offering the population a meaningful choice of options. As they are now, the opposition parties are both too small and too inexperienced to manage the challenges the country faces. Half a century of single-party rule and authoritarianism have left a handful of parties with weak structures and finances and without programmes that distinguish them, either from the RCD or from one another. Other parties, including the Islamist Ennahda never legalised by Ben Ali were driven brutally underground. All these parties, far from having exemplary democratic habits, became miniature replicas of the ruling party, intolerant of debate or divergent views. It will be impossible for these parties to build up the strength, democratic structures and independent platforms necessary in time to compete in the first elections. Providing a counter to the RCD and preventing an

updated version returning to power means, at this point, finding enough consensus among all parties, including Ennahda, to form a solid coalition with shared lists of candidates. That, in turn, means that the parties need to concentrate on cooperating with one another rather than competing against one another.

Right now, for the transition to have a chance, the protestors must be persuaded to go home and give the interim government a chance. If for no other reason, the Tunisian economy requires it. If the tourist season is lost and the country's credit rating drops due to continued instability, Tunisians' situation will go from bad to worse. Since Polybius times it has been known that ochlocracy, or the rule of the mob, wherein governments are forced into adopting policies or decisions by a tyrannical leaderless mob, leads not towards democracy but degenerates into autocracy. The possibility of an authoritarian relapse in Tunisia is very real. And if that turns out to be the case, the Jasmine revolution will not have been a revolution, and Tunisia will turn out to be a model, but not one to follow.