

What perspectives for the political process in Tunisia?

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In January 2011, the blood of the martyrs, the suffering of the injured, the sacrifices of thousands of syndicalistic and political and human-rights militants, and the solidarity of all their friends and families culminated in toppling the head of the authoritarian, traitor and corrupt power. The regime was baffled looking for ways to contain the popular uprising, while seismic waves of this resistance movement were spreading until the dissolution of the Kasbah2 Sit-In and the announcement of Beji Caid Essebsi as prime minister, as well as the enlargement of the *Higher Authority for Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution* in March 2011. Among the principal goals of the March 2011 process was the organization of elections for a *National Constituent Assembly*, to be supervised by an independent electoral administration with an electoral law that guarantees freedom and pluralism – contrary to the situation in the past. At the same time, ‘liberating’ laws were promulgated concerning the media and the organization of associations and parties.

The main characteristics of this process were:

1. The newly established political mechanisms played a central role. But following each election, there was dissatisfaction with actual improvements on the ground and it was commonly expressed that the solution lies in the forthcoming elections. Moreover, politicians linked to the old regime emphasized that constraints in overcoming the crisis lie in the actual political and electoral system that prevents any faction from being really in power and that enables the representation of financially weak and less popular political actors.
2. Limited political reforms and the restriction of some judicial reforms in the first period leading up to the elections of 2011 that did not do enough to address the essential value of 'freedom'. Moreover, in the 2014 constitution, the ruling-class coalition refrained from adapting proper legislation regarding individual liberties. In addition, the formation of a constitutional court was delayed and the work of the constitutional instances (independent instances pursuant to an organic law: *Independent High authority of audiovisual communication (HAICA)*, *Independent High Electoral Commission (ISIE)*, *Truth and Dignity Commission (IVD)*, *National Anti-Corruption Authority (INLUCC)*...) got impeded. Attempts were made to control them through partisan appointments or by exerting pressure on their fundings and even not respecting their decisions and not supporting them in implementing those.
3. Economic and social reforms necessary for the development of the Tunisian economy and integral to upholding dignity, freedom and national sovereignty were neglected. All successive governments since 2011 reverted to the same failed options from Ben Ali's era. Debt soared and crisis deepened as the country continued to depend on suppliers, smugglers, speculators and investors in the services sector. These players were often the main financiers of election campaigns and political parties, they dominated the media outlets at the expense of larger society and its interests.

The main proponents of the "March 2011 Process" were able to establish enough enthusiasm around the "centrality of the political process", while postponing urgent economic and social reforms until after the Constituent Assembly elections. Most of national organizations and

political parties supported this approach. Only a few organizations and personalities warned that prioritizing the political process would neglect popular demands for dignity, freedom and social justice, and therefore they appealed for boycotting the elections. These opposition actors insisted that the process failed to guarantee real representation for the interests of oppressed groups. They argued that corrupt political money and the media colluded with the centers of power to ensure favorable outcomes.

The 2011 elections had a historic number of registered voters (4.2 million registered, or about 52% of all eligible Tunisians¹) and the highest voter turnout in Tunisian history (about 3.8 million voters— 90% of voters registered voluntarily and 47% of those eligible to vote²). And yet, young people, especially inhabitants of rural areas, did not show up in great numbers. Young people who registered did not exceed 30% of the total eligible and voter turnout of the registered 30% was about 9%. Most youth swayed between indifference and boycott. These statistics are a result of the social and political tensions since 2011 under the various successive governments. Further election statistics reveal a steady decline in active participation. For the legislative elections of 2014, about 65% of eligible voters registered voluntarily³ went to the polls, while in the municipal elections of May 2018 only 33.7%⁴ did. These trends are serious threat to an inclusive political process in Tunisia today.

Today, about nine years after the popular uprising (that lasted from December 17, 2010 to 28 February 2011) and eight years after the first elections, the upcoming legislative and presidential elections seems to be overcast by the growing indifference of Tunisian citizens

¹ Report of the Independent High Electoral Commission (ISIE) for 2011 published by the Official Gazette of the Republic of Tunisia.

² Ibid.

³ Or 3.4 million of 5.25 million Tunisians (website of the newspaper Assabah, Thursday October 30, 2014); it should be noted that in 2014, the Independent High Authority did not automatically register those who did not do so voluntarily (unlike during the elections of 2011). The Authority also did not provide polling stations at their disposal, as it did not provide the participation rate, only of those who had the right of registration and election. Although the number of voluntarily registered voters increased by about 1 million Tunisian citizens from 2011 to 2014, the total number of voters decreased by 400,000.

⁴ Although small-district municipal elections are considered to be more intimately tied to citizens and their concerns, participation rates even deteriorated in this arena (Bardo, Souk Al-Jadid, Serss, Tibar, Laayoune and more).

and its oppressed fractions. Only a small minority is calling for boycott. Meanwhile, the actual participants in the electoral process are fearing record-low levels of voter participation.

What are the precise reasons for this indifference? And what are the possible implications for the country's political process?

The enthusiasm during the 2011 elections was associated with great hope in overcoming the economic and social crisis of the past decade. It was also associated with finally breaking free from the repression and restrictions of various rights and freedoms at the hands of 'the circles of the palace' (Ben Ali, Trabelsi, Mabrouk, Al-Jilani, Chbiboub, Boujbel and co.). Ben Ali and his entourage had a well choke-hold on competition and initiatives. Two mottos rapidly spread across Tunisia, "Work, freedom, national dignity" and "Work is a right, you gang of thieves", and people were illusory that new elections could bring to power a political coalition directly committed to the concerns of the whole nation. Many Tunisians believed a new chapter in history was unfolding in which they would be liberated from the traditional political elite, and sovereignty and dignity would finally be respected. And yet, the initial excitement was premature. The ability of the ruling class to reestablish itself in a new political arena was underestimated. They were able to form new alliances that did not contradict with their interests and maintenance of their power. The ruling class took advantage of imperfections in the new electoral process to control results with little margin of error or threatening diversity.

Issues with electoral integrity have been common since 2011⁵, but it's getting worse from one election to the next. Little by little, influential actors in power are chipping away with impunity at the institutions of the state, especially the constitutional instances, made since 2011.

The last eight years have been marked by the manipulation of the state and its executive/administrative, security and judiciary. The intention has been to liquidate political opponents, obscure public opinion, provoke infighting and reestablish control. The ruling class has been effective at navigating various coalitions and finding different avenues of political expression. It has also succeeded in not holding accountable those responsible for the

⁵ Political publicity, manipulated polls, unbalanced and unfair media coverage, electoral irregularities and vote-buying...

revolution's deaths and injuries, whitewashing the issue and further aggravating the suffering of the wounded of the revolution, by neglecting them. Furthermore, entrenched elites have distorted and blurred the facts about deportation networks⁶ and political assassinations⁷ and the secret apparatus of the Ennahda Movement⁸. And finally, it has been selectively dealt with corruption cases relating to Ben Ali, his entourage and the new mafia groupings.

In sum, the March 2011 process of "democratic transition"⁹ has been marked by an inability to overcome the economic and social crisis: by not establishing constitutional institutions¹⁰, by unsatisfactory legislation to achieve the goals of national sovereignty¹¹ and to protect the hard-fought democratic gains. In addition, the ruling political elite depended on different lobbies families maintaining the wealth and therefore passing bills that serve their interests and the interest of monopolies¹².

What we observe in the current elections of 2019 is an outgrowth of legislative and presidential candidates from the ruling class coalition: either if they presided in positions in

⁶ Translator Note: Networks of deportation are often responsible Tunisian youth joining the Jihad in Syria and Libya.

⁷ Translator Note: Specifically, the political assassinations of Chokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmi, two-left wing politicians murdered in Tunisia in 2012, are noteworthy.

⁸ Translator Note: The so-called 'secret apparatus' is believed to be under the control of Ennahda and is being accused of involvement in the political assassinations of 2012.

⁹ The term is inaccurate because what happened in 2011 was the "creation of a democracy after the break with authoritarian rule", not a smooth and gradual transition to healthy democracy. The term was coined mostly from abroad, like the "Jasmine Revolution" and the "Arab Spring", and flooded the conference rooms of Tunisian civil and political society. "Democratic transition" does not respond to the needs of the Tunisian society and economy in the creation of a social democracy and the real liberation of the means of production from the dominance of the wealthy families. These families' fortune is based on economic rent-seeking and speculation and linked to the interests of foreign partners in the major global economies of Europe, the United States, Turkey, the Gulf and Israel.

¹⁰ For example, the disruption of the creation of the Constitutional Court and independent constitutional bodies

¹¹ The bill to audit debts, the draft law criminalizing normalization with the Zionist enemy, and a draft for the regulation and organization of "polls", for example.

¹² Most recently, in the Finance Act of 2019, owners of large areas, petroleum companies, banks and telecommunication companies are exempt from tax, as of all other sectors, at the beginning of an electoral year. As well as insisting on passing the law of "administrative reconciliation" in September 2017 by lots of violations and without it achieving any economic and financial profits for the country.

the “sit-in of departure”¹³ camp or the “sit-in of legitimacy”¹⁴ camp. As the economic crisis worsens and foreign funding runs low, there is now the potential for a period of devastating and open clashes between numerous groups within the ruling class coalition. The ruling class has not yet found a combination that satisfies its various components and the probability of further alienating and excluding lower segments of their supporters is high, as those may join the opposition of the political process since March 2011.

At first, it seemed that the dividedness of the ruling class coalition could present an opportunity to cast aside centralized authority (or at least weakening it) and achieve a modicum of success towards true national sovereignty. Nevertheless, the entrenched forces of the “democratic transition” have proved resilient. The forces resisting the process of democratic transition boycotting the elections in the name of the people are less organized and have fewer resources at hand than in 2014. These forces capacity to confront upcoming battles in institutional and non-institutional spheres is close to zero at this point. The current reality bodes ill, as the achievements of the 2011 uprising from “political freedoms” to the “electoral process”, despite their shortcomings, are threatened. As well as the inability to transform those achievements that they benefit the majority of the oppressed of society.

The current political process is an important achievement on a surface level, but its scope and effectiveness are limited because the ruling class coalition is curtailing those achievements as they are sustaining their own self-preservation and interests.

The condition of the Tunisian political process is one of “osteoporosis”. Collapse seems imminent at any moment as the economic crisis worsens, wealth production diminishes, and the hostility of dominant groups increases, as they rather serve the interests of their imperialist partners. Democracy in the semi-colonies is in a state of “ephemeral parenthesis”

¹³ “Modernist” right-wingers, former *RCD*-members (the party of the dictator Ben Ali) and bureaucratic and degenerated left-wing trade unionists who formed *NidaaTounes* (now broken down into *NidaaTounes*, *TahyaTounes*, *Heart of Tunisia*, *Amal Tounes*, *Al-Badil* and *Machrou’ Tounes*)

¹⁴ Religious and conservative right regrouped mainly in *Ennahdha*, but also in populist expressions and with tendencies to contain the “revolutionary attribute” like the “Coalition of Dignity” descendant to “Committees of the protection of the revolution” and the “Tunisian Organization for Work” in “*Al-Irada*” of the former President Moncef Marzouki and its alliance with “*Wafa Movement*” of Abdul Raouf Ayadi.

unless it is enhanced by genuine economic and agricultural reform, the liberation of society from feudal relationships and an end to ideologically repressive relations of domination over ethnic, cultural, and gender diversities it's producing. The "electoral process", despite all its gains, will remain an "ephemeral parenthesis" as long as it is steered by a select few and fails to be all-inclusive and as long as the national and popular sovereignty on the decision-taking process over the natural resources and the alliances of the country is not retrieved. We have observed this unfortunate state of affairs throughout Arab history (i.e. Egypt before the coup of the "Free Officers" in 1952, Iraq before the military coup of Abd al Karim Qasim in 1958¹⁵, Lebanon before the civil war in 1958 and in 1975, the Sudan before the coup of *the Islamic Salvation Front* in 1989, and Mauritania before the overthrow of Mou'auia Ould Taya in 2005 and before the military coup of Mohammed Ould Abdel Aziz in 2008).

On the one hand, we have observed political elites – especially the ruling ones – messing with electoral and parliamentary mechanisms, as well as frequent government and party-switching. And expectantly, the common refrain of the elites today became: "there's no going back from the process of elections and democracy". On the other hand, we have observed the inability of organizations claiming radicality, resistance and revolutionism to develop proper organizational structures and evolving their strategies. Together, these two factors make for a fragile democracy at risk of a military-security coup and the regression to authoritarianism. And in a worst-case scenario, infighting between the factions of the reactionary ruling class leads to civil war in our country.

Let us save our country and our people from harm and persevere in the struggle to protect, promote, develop and expand the achievements.

¹⁵ The characterization of it as a military coup should not negate the significant achievements of the revolution of July 52 and July 1958 in Iraq. A military coup was simply the technique used to make a change in authority.