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Tunisia's Revolution, 4 Years On: Achievements and Challenges

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On January 14, 2015, Tunisia marked the fourth anniversary of its dramatic uprising against Zayn al-'Abidin Ben 'Ali's authoritarian regime. The official day, marked by official ceremonies and processions, was dedicated to remembering Tunisians who were killed during the 2010-2011 revolution. The Tunisian uprising's sudden and unexpected success quickly had a ripple effect across the Middle East and North Africa, generating a series of mass protests commonly referred to as the "Arab Spring." But while the results of the upheavals have been extremely problematic in most other places, Tunisia has experienced relative success in its political transition. The process has not been as easy as some Tunisians expected, and is still far from complete. Nevertheless, it highlights a number of factors that may help explain the reasons why post-revolutionary developments in other countries have faltered. It also underscores some of Tunisia's unique features that distinguish it from other countries in the region.

In the aftermath of Ben 'Ali's abrupt flight, which stunned Tunisian society, the country embarked on a transitional path aimed at reconstructing its political system and securing a new democratic political culture. Throughout this process, several principles that historically have underpinned Tunisian public life continued to affect domestic developments. These include an ongoing quest for stability, a political culture which values moderation, and widespread efforts to secure social and political consensus between rival groups. The pursuit of stability was evident in the immediate goal of electing a National Constituent Assembly, which was entrusted with framing a new constitution and establishing new governmental institutions. The Assembly, elected in October 2011, was comprised of several key parties which were forced to cooperate with each other, as no single party commanded a majority. The coalition which governed the country after the 2011 elections combined the Islamist party *Ennahda*, which won the largest single portion of the votes (37%), with two secular parties – the

left wing CPR, led by longtime human rights activist Moncef Marzouki, and the centrist *Ettakatol*. While Ennahda controlled the government, Marzouki was appointed the country's president. While this coalition configuration fell short of *Ennahda's* initial hopes of gaining control over the decisive levers of government, in hindsight it reinforced the tendency towards negotiation and compromise that is a prominent feature of Tunisia's political culture.

Throughout 2012, Tunisia confronted new realities that stemmed from the post-revolutionary process it was experiencing. The challenges may not have been as acute as in other countries, but they were still complex and problematic. The Tunisian economy remained sluggish and found it difficult to shake off the revolution's impact. Unemployment remained stubbornly high (officially more than 16 percent), foreign investments decreased, and the country's tourist industry—a pivotal component of the economy—did not bounce back to its pre-revolutionary levels. Many Tunisians were concerned with the deteriorating internal security situation and the emergence of violent Islamist groups.

But beyond these concerns was the main goal of adopting a new constitution and moving from there to electing new state institutions and leaders. This process proved to be more lengthy than originally anticipated. Critics of Ennahda accused the party of purposely prolonging the discussions concerning the constitution's various articles, in an effort to promote its own ideals and goals. The debate over the constitution became heated over topics such as women's rights. Ennahda critics claimed that the party sought to undermine the status of women by outlining a more traditional role for women in family life (see below), which fit the party's ideology. Ennahda leaders denied this and expressed their support of the status of women in Tunisia. Along the way, a new secular opposition force emerged, *Nidaa Tounes* ("Tunisia Calling"). Led by veteran Tunisian politician Beji Caid Essebsi, the party championed a "modern," secular vision for post-revolutionary Tunisia, in opposition to Ennahda's explicitly religious outlook.

Domestic political life became increasingly polarized throughout 2013. Two political assassinations of left-wing figures shocked the public. By the summer of 2013, widespread disenchantment with the Ennahda-led coalition threatened to derail the entire political process, as massive anti-government protests erupted. A number of important civil society groups, such as Tunisia's powerful trade unions, intervened by demanding that Ennahda relinquish power and speed up the constitution drafting process. The unions organized mass protests against the Ennahda-led government and appeared to be challenging the party from below. Fearing that the party would be forcibly removed from power in a manner similar to what happened to the Muslim Brotherhood led government in Egypt during the summer of 2013, Ennahda leaders finally relented and a new technocratic government was established. The national dialogue between the

country's numerous political parties intensified, and a constitution was finally approved in early 2014. The document offers a blueprint for a new democratic political system, and reflects compromises between political rivals. Controversial topics such as the role of Islam in Tunisian politics were treated delicately, in an effort to obtain a high level of consensus. The constitution guaranteed freedom of religion while also endowing the state with the responsibility to "protect religion," which could eventually lead to legislation that might undermine religious freedom. Women's rights, which have historically been highly developed in Tunisia, were noted in the new constitution, as was the state's duty to strengthen and develop them further. A new supreme constitutional court was expected to supervise the constitution's implementation, which could potentially encounter obstacles and generate clashes between political groups.

Moving beyond the achievement of securing a new constitution that reflects a social and political consensus, the most noteworthy post- revolutionary achievement in Tunisia is the strengthening of the country's civil society. Already well developed before the revolution, it was Tunisia's civil society that steered rival parties to embrace dialogue and compromise in the debates about the new constitution and indicated that it would not tolerate a social and political breakdown. These groups, particularly the trade unions, intervened at a critical moment in the summer of 2013, effectively forcing Ennahda to withdraw from the government while promoting discussions over the new constitution. The position of these groups in Tunisian society has helped secure Tunisia's transition.

The next step in Tunisia's transition was parliamentary and presidential elections in Fall 2014. In the weeks before the elections, most analysts contended that the three coalition parties in power faced voters angry with the lack of progress in key areas and a rising sense of instability. The parties were expected to suffer accordingly at the polls. Voters indeed voted against Ennahda, granting more parliamentary seats to Nidaa Tounes and electing its head, Essebsi, as Tunisia's new president. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that the Tunisian Islamists were rejected by society and are receding from public life. Ennahda still held 26 percent of the seats in parliament, which is not a small figure and makes it a potential coalition partner in a new government. It has maintained a strong support base in the southern, peripheral part of the country that lags behind the more developed and prosperous coastal urban areas.

While Ennahda lost its leading position in parliament, its representatives still occupy seats in the house. Concerned about their sagging electoral prospects, the Islamist party preferred not to field its own candidate in the presidential elections, placing more emphasis on the parliamentary vote instead. Ennahda viewed the parliament as a more important institution in the emerging new political system and sought to avoid a defeat in the presidential vote that would

have branded the party as a spent political force. Unofficially, party figures endorsed the incumbent (and their coalition partner) Moncef Marzouki. The presidential elections were viewed by opponents of Nidaa Tounes as a struggle between the old Tunisian regime (which they argued was effectively in control of Nidaa Tounes) and new post- revolutionary forces. Tunisian voters did not view a vote in favor of Nidaa Tounes leader Essebsi as a vote for relics of the Ben 'Ali regime and elected Essebsi in December, after a second round of elections. For them (particularly secular voters) Essebsi appeared more experienced and better prepared to steer Tunisia ahead, rather than Marzouki who was perceived as incompetent and allied with the Islamists.

In the aftermath of the vote, Tunisia's political system was able to contain these shifts in power, balancing (at least for now) the inherent tension between Islam and democracy. Ennahda leaders' willingness to concede defeat was viewed as yet another sign of Tunisia's political development. At the same time, its participation in a broad governing coalition in Tunisia remains an open question. Ennahda leaders expressed interest in joining such a coalition, seeking to continue playing a constructive role in Tunisian political life. Yet their interest until recently has been rejected by Nidaa Tounes figures, who claim to have no interest in becoming involved with the Islamist party. At the same time, Nidaa Tounes' lack of a parliamentary majority along with the need to secure a governing coalition make it difficult to imagine a strong coalition government without Ennahda. The recent announcement late last week of a narrowly based coalition government without Ennahda suggests that Tunisian politics may be heading towards a more unstable period. Some commentators have opined that a coalition with the Islamist party is necessary in order to maintain the consensus and unity that have for the most part underpinned Tunisia's post revolution politics.

As Tunisia enters the next stage in its post-revolutionary transition, putting its new political institutions in action, commentators and political figures have warned against being overly optimistic about the future. Tunisia is indeed a "success story" compared to other countries. But an uncritical embrace of the "success" narrative may obstruct the ability to understand and appreciate Tunisia's post-revolutionary trajectory, and the continuing challenges it faces.

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