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## Tunisia: A socio-economic oasis in a political desert

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By African governmental and economic standards, Tunisia is a rare bright spot. According to the *2009 Index of Economic Freedom* (IEF), product of a collaboration between the Heritage Foundation and the *Wall Street Journal*, Tunisia ranks as the 98<sup>th</sup> freest economy in the world. On a scale in which 100 stands for the maximum level of freedom, Tunisia scores 81,6 in Business Freedom, 76,5 in Fiscal Freedom and 60,1 in Labor Freedom. Although its overall score is just below the world average, the IEF adds that “regulation has become more efficient and streamlined” and, in spite of moderate results, “Tunisia has pursued economic reforms aimed at maintaining a prudent macroeconomic framework, liberalizing domestic prices and controls, and reducing the public sector’s role in economic activity”.

Another international indicator where Tunisia has a good ranking is Vision of Humanity’s *2009 Global Peace Index* (GPI). According to the GPI, Tunisia is the second safest country in Africa, the fifth-ranked in the Arab world and the first in the Maghreb.

The dark side of this success story is that all these current positive signs were achieved at the expense of political freedom. It is not by accident that Tunisia is ranked ‘not free’ in the *Map of Freedom in the World* of Freedom House, or as an authoritarian regime by the *Democracy Index* of *The Economist* magazine. Since its independence in 1956, Tunisia has been run by a single party system.

With ups and downs, the participation of its citizens in public life has been considerably restricted and human rights frequently overlooked. For the most part, political constraints are justified with the argument of preventing Islamist parties from acquiring political leverage and thus causing a regression of the social achievements of the last half century.

Altering the current asymmetry between the socio-economic and political fronts will require an accurate understanding of the root causes of the situation, as well as the role that may be played by external actors, since, after more than 50 years of independence, centralized political control is now part of the state’s own identity and is deeply entrenched in the country’s daily dynamics, making self-initiated reform extremely unlikely.

In order to take raise political freedom to the same level as Tunisia’s socio-economic indicators, it is important to grasp the country’s political history, its particular form of Islamism, and what the European Union (EU) – Tunisia’s traditional partner – can achieve as a potential bridge toward democracy.

### **Social progress versus political oppression**

Habib Bourguiba was Tunisia’s first president after the country gained its independence from France. Bourguiba had an important clout that resulted from his years of



anti-colonialist struggle, but he still had to face political competition. The new president severely repressed the opposition, especially Islamist parties, which he considered a menace to what Tunisia should be: a secular-nationalist country inspired by French republicanism. Bourguiba was hostile to both Pan-Arabism and Islamism, creating a state of surveillance and harassment to all possible competitors.

On a different level, though still resorting to dictatorial methods, the president carved a number of policies centered in developing Tunisia's social and economic spheres, which led to admirable advances in gender equality, education, employment and generally low poverty rates. As he took office, Bourguiba approved a Personal Status Code that gave women the rights of having a passport and opening a bank account, incentivized women to start their own business and, among other things, banned polygamy. Furthermore, the law only granted divorce after the woman's financial rights were assured by judiciary deliberation. Women's presence was assured in the judiciary branch, in political institutions and in the education sector. The state also invested in social welfare policies, generated high literacy rates for both men and women, and was able to foster sustainable economic growth without overreliance on fossil fuels. Thus the middle class was expanded and new elites formed, making Tunisia an oasis of stability in a region marked by political violence and military coups. These unilateral policies and their positive results allowed Bourguiba and his Neo-Destour Party to consolidate power as they ignored domestic and international criticism.

Despite his belief in republicanism, Bourguiba introduced a constitutional amendment in 1974 that permitted him to be president for life, a path interrupted in November 1987 when the current president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, deposed him in a bloodless coup. At the beginning, Ben Ali apparently perceived the need of political reforms and of putting an end to the concept of president for life. However, since then, his exercise of power reveals a differ-

ent tack. The Neo-Destour Party was renamed by Ben Ali as the Democratic Constitutional Rally (DCR), but the change of label led to no shifts in the previous socio-economic and political practices and, in every election in which he participated, Ben Ali, at least allegedly, received 90% of the vote.

The opposition party ban was ended in 1981, yet when the rival forces are usually described as the 'loyal opposition', it is difficult to talk about political pluralism. In order to establish a political party, the applicants have to fulfill

a number of strict requirements and overcome several deliberate bureaucratic roadblocks. Attaining official recognition entails receiving state financial support, building of party infrastructures and a lesser degree of state harassment. In a nutshell, the applicants have to choose between abiding by the will of the regime and having a legal, though restricted, voice, or working clandestinely (or even not existing at all). In the parliament, the majority of the seats go to directly elected candidates, while the remaining 25% are proportionally distributed among the least successful parties. In the final analysis, what it means is that the officially recognized opposition parties compete for mandates within this leftover 25% of the seats because the DCR dominates the majority.

Control over the media is also unequivocal. The Government either has direct control over editorial guidelines or exerts pressure on independent boards of administration and journalists. The surveillance and gagging of published and broadcasted news leads the Tunisian media to adopt self-imposed censorship for the reason that, apart from avoiding persecution, they need sales and advertisements in order to maintain financial viability.

Ben Ali relies on Bourguiba's formula of using an indisputable social and economic success as a mask for the absence of an opening of the political system. Nevertheless, the traditional excuses may be gradually disappearing. In spite of being a pioneer in the Arab World with regard to family planning policies, a generation of ambitious, educated youth is facing employment problems. Therefore, waving the threat of Isla-

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mist terrorism to justify discretionary clampdowns and gain Western empathy will remain an important instrument for controlling the political landscape.

### Tunisian Islamism

Across its modern history, we find in Tunisia a broad range of approaches to Islam, such as the Maliki School of jurisprudence (one of the four recognized Sunni Schools of Law, dominant in North Africa and with a strict interpretation of Islam), Salafism (a Pan-Islamic, politically aggressive strain that, for example, ideologically structures al-Qaeda) and Sufism (a moderate and mystical-aesthetic interpretation according to which a person's obligations to his fellow men are stronger than his obligations to God).

Islamism – which, for the purpose of this article, will be used as a synonym of 'political Islam' – is a highly diversified and complex ideology. Tunisia's case is a good example of such a reality, showing that Islamism does not always equals radicalism and that radicalization is not necessarily synonymous with terrorism – which is different from saying that they are acceptable by democratic standards.

A benchmark of Tunisian Islamism is the an-Nahda Party (NP), founded in 1989, whose name is a clear allusion to the 19<sup>th</sup> century period known as the 'Islamic Cultural Renaissance'. The NP is a by-product of dissidence from a late 1970s Salafist group that pursued an anti-westernization agenda shaped by imposing Sharia, molding society according to Islamic teachings and establishing the Caliphate. Members of this group were persecuted, imprisoned, tortured and even executed by Bourguiba's regime. When Ben Ali took charge of the country, many of these men were released from Tunisian jails as a proof of good faith and reformism. Yet, when the Islamists had a strong political performance in a late 1980s by-election, Ben Ali retracted his reforms and gave a new impetus to the former president's methods of damage control. By the 1990s, nearly every member of the NP had been forced into exile, for the most part in the United Kingdom and France. Although being the most noteworthy

group of Tunisian Islamists, the NP has a scarce – if any – following in its home country due to years spent outside Tunisian borders.

An interesting factor, though, is the effect that living in Europe had in the Islamists dome of power. Sheik Rachid al-Gannushi, NP's historical leader, and other chief members have included democracy, pluralism and violence prevention as defining axes of their political program. Apart from criticizing the regime and human rights violations, they openly recognize the European model as an example for Tunisia and demonstrate

that they desire a moderate and respectful project for the country from which they have escaped. An-Nahda is therefore often considered an example of 'liberal Islamism'. But their rhetoric is far from being coherent or unanimous. Women's role in society falls into a hazy section of their political doctrine and, while praising Europe's model, they do not refrain from accusing European states of protecting a 'tumor' in the Middle East – Israel – and of perpetuating North African dictatorships. Sheik Gannushi himself has manifested difficulty complying with Europe's separation between state and religion or, for example, sexual liberty. Given Islamism's usual political pragmatism and tactical skills, it does not seem prudent to place a democratic label on the an-Nahda Party. Above all, they seek European official recognition in order to acquire greater leverage to face Ben Ali.

Still, the NP is not the only Islamist force in Tunisia. Salafism has grown within the country and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb frequently operates in neighboring Algeria and the Sahel Desert. Indeed, Tunisia witnessed a truck bombing of a synagogue in Djerba

in April 2002 that caused 21 deaths, and the discovery of terrorist cells has been reported over the last few years, even though the stories in Tunisia's media should be viewed with caution.

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## Tunisia and the EU

Tunisia signed with the EU an Association Agreement in July 1995, becoming the first North African country to enter into such an accord, and later established a free trade area with the European block. Nowadays, the relationship's framework and correspondent goals are contained in the EU-Tunisia Action Plan, which is under the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). The ENP has a strategic security value for the EU as it aims to assure stability around its borders. It is stated that this policy with neighboring countries is built on shared values and common interests pursued through a joint ownership perspective. With regard to Tunisia, the Action Plan sets several short and mid term objectives on a broad range of topics: gradual economic integration in the internal European market, free trade, labor regulations, development, political and institutional reforms, strengthening of administrative and judicial cooperation, environmental protection, enhancement of political dialogue, EU financial support, energy markets and security, combating illegal migration, money laundering and terrorism. However, and in spite of several initiatives developed on the aforementioned areas, the core of this relationship is trade. The EU accounts for close to 70% of Tunisian imports and 75% of Tunisian exports, and is the primary foreign investor in the country. In a Commission Staff Paper on the partnership's progress from December 2006, the EU acknowledges significant improvement on economic issues, but recognizes a lesser degree of success on the political front – for example, the Human Rights Subcommittee (one of the several subcommittees that resulted from the Action Plan) was still deciding its own rules of procedure. Three years later, in a memo from April 2009, the EU again notes major developments on economy and trade, but, with respect to democracy and human rights, there is little more to show than the initially established objectives. Apparently, the European Union is focused on developing common interests with a reliable economical partner and is less committed to development of freedom of speech and of association, or overall political reforms that should constitute the shared values.

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The lack of advances in the political sector has different causes. First, the EU sees economic development and social progress as a trigger of democratization. The validity of such a chain of causality is arguable, but aside from theoretical postulations, Europe needs to look closer into Tunisia's specific case. It is precisely social and economic progress that has sustained autocracy since the 1950s. Thus, working from these misguided assumptions does not offer great expectations. Second, partnerships tend to work between the EU and the associated countries' governments by ignoring social organizations and opposition parties. Empowering civil society will not be possible if this linear and exclusive logic continues to reign. Third, the complete absence of a strategy regarding Islamist parties is also harmful for further democratization. European public opinion is generally characterized by fear of Islamism, which has increased with Muslim immigration. The EU itself reflects these troubled feelings, though it is particularly vocal when it comes to condemning human rights abuses by North African regimes – not only because of values, but also because it does not want to sound Islamophobic nor radicalize Muslims. Hence, the European Union sends words that are not matched by deeds in an ambiguous approach shaped by suspicion and reluctance.

## Conclusion

Tunisia's social achievements, economic development and privileged relation with the EU place the country in excellent conditions to successfully undertake a democratization process, which will happen sooner or later. An important part of Tunisian society is eager for the opening of their country's political process. Bearing in mind the growing numbers of young, unemployed citizens, establishing channels of political communication and participation could be the most sustainable way to prevent social problems, namely Islamist radicalization. The underlying values of liberal democracy are desirable for the people of Tunisia on their own merits, and the EU will simply be following the Western trend by seeking to export its own political system to the Maghreb. Moreover, and from a different perspective, if the EU allows the cur-



rent state of affairs to continue, it could degenerate into security problems in a neighboring country and intensify the already strong flow of migration towards European states. But rushing or imposing democracy in Arab autocracies can imply significant costs for both promoters and targets of such policies. As paradoxical as it may seem, it can result in a regression of individual rights, democratic development, security and regional stability. Democratization should be a gradual process, led by Tunisians, respecting the country's idiosyncrasies and aiming to prevent the appearance of political vacuums. Instead of abrupt changes, it would be wiser to craft a strategy based on demanding more transparency, rule of law and accountability from the Tunisian authorities and simultaneously working on freeing media and civil society by facilitating freedom of association.

Europe, and the West as a whole, has been more focused on stabilizing Algeria and engaging Libya, which recently reentered the international community. However, Tun-

sia deserves more political attention, as it can be a role model for both European Union's ENP and the North African region.

Even if the threat of Islamism is clearly an excuse for maintaining absolute political control, legalizing Islamist parties without previously guaranteeing the true acceptance of liberal democratic values could present itself as a fatal error. Islamism tends to have an instrumental relationship with democracy: it is a condemnable mean that is worth taking in order to achieve a sacred end. The absence of a coherent strategy due to reluctance to engage is not prudent from a policymaking point of view. The European Union should be clear about setting preconditions for political parties with which it will deal, such as separation between state and religion, gender equality and internationally accepted human rights standards. In this way, Islamist parties can be used as a force for the strengthening of democracy in Tunisia, rather than its replacement by theocracy.

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