

Democratic transition in Tunisia

A rewarding path

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Tunisia now stands at the crossroads with great assets and large opportunities but also facing numerous challenges. Tunisia indeed has several assets to make the democratic transition a success: a high literacy rate, a developed middle class, the very advanced status of women and a high level of education and hard workers.

The political challenge which Tunisia is now facing is that the democratic transition has to succeed. The economic challenge is to avoid the vicious circle of poverty and rising unemployment which would fuel discontent and disappointment. Ultimately, the transition will only be successful if economic progress occurs.

Tunisia has started its difficult journey towards democracy. The road looks long and the process sometimes painful as transitions are never perfect and are difficult and often disappointingly slow processes.

Security has been restored and efforts are being deployed in order to keep a balance between the management of social expectations, on the one hand, and macro-economic and budget stability, on the other, not to mention the steps to solve unemployment, re-energize the economy, narrow regional disparities and reduce poverty.

While striving to manage a score of internal economic and social difficulties, last year we had to confront another problem coming from our South. From the outset, the Government of Tunisia adopted an open-door policy and allowed all those fleeing death in Libya to enter the country. Since the start of the uprising, Tunisia has hosted more than 900,000 refugees and thousands of Libyan brothers were, and some still are, being hosted by Tunisians who share their homes. In addition, many Tunisians who went to Libya to make a modest living were forced to flee leaving everything behind, thus adding to some 700,000 unemployed persons in my country.

In this context, I should like to mention the exemplary role played by the Tunisian Republican Armed Forces in ensuring the continuity of the State and its institutions, the protection of citizens, the efficient management of the massive flow of refugees over our southern borders, the stability and integrity of the country, and the success of the electoral process within the framework of the basic rules governing the democratic control of the armed forces.

Since January, there have been advances in areas related to freedom of expression and freedom of association, accountability and political reform, including the establishment of an Independent Higher Authority for Elections which organized, supervised and monitored the entire electoral process of the election of the Constituent Assembly held on 23 October. Those elections were the crowning glory of the Tunisian Revolution process which opened up wider prospects for the different political trends to enter the political race.

In this regard, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly deployed throughout the country its observation teams consisting of 90 parliamentarians, and was part of an instrumental solidarity move by the international community at a particularly important moment in the history of Tunisia.

The first transparent and democratic election in Tunisia brought about the first freely elected coalition Government. The National Constituent Assembly (NCA) started drafting the new Constitution in consultation with political trends and components of civil society.

Democracy, fundamental freedom and human rights are the main pillars of the Government action. In this regard, during her visit to Tunisia last July, Ms Navi Pillay, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, signed a 'host country agreement', and opened, at the request of the Government, the first UN human rights office in a North African country bordering the Mediterranean. The UNHCHR deployed international human rights officers to Tunisia to follow up on their recommendations made by senior experts after their assessment mission in early February 2011.

The UNHCHR is also providing advice on the reform of the national Human Rights Institution, in conformity with the international standards known as the Paris Principles. It is also working with the Ministry of Justice and holding a series of consultations with judges to strengthen judicial independence and has concluded an agreement with the Ministry of the Interior on a programme of human rights capacity-building in the security sector, including the training of police officers.

Moreover, in order to confirm its commitment that no future serious violations of human rights will take place with impunity, Tunisia has ratified four important treaties: the first Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and

Political Rights, the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and the UN Convention on Enforced Disappearances. Tunisia also became the 116th state to ratify the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court.

The Government has also extended a standing invitation to all special procedures of the Human Rights Council. The Special Rapporteur on torture and the Special Rapporteur on human rights and counter-terrorism have already conducted missions during last May.

Recently, Tunisia hosted the meetings of the Initiative of the Community of Democracies Group, which aims to support the democratic transition in my country. The meetings were attended by senior officials representing many friendly countries, including the Netherlands and the Slovak Republic, which chaired the working group, the United States of America, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Turkey and Austria. During the meetings, the participants examined the priorities of the democratic transition process in Tunisia, defined by the Tunisian side as revolving around reforms of the security sector, the judiciary apparatus, the public administration, regional development and boosting the role of civil society.

At the economic level and in the very short term, the aim is to cope with the decline in key economic sectors such as tourism and trade and to meet immediate challenges in terms of budget assistance and providing support to regions and employment, while retaining the country's economic and social balances, establishing better governance, speeding up local infrastructure development, developing human resources, securing integration in international markets and reforming the financial sector, promoting exchange programmes and access to knowledge for the youth and a mobility partnership aimed notably at students, teachers, researchers and businessmen and businesswomen as well as securing access to markets through deeper and global integration with the European Union as part of an advanced status and partnership and free trade agreements with the other member states.

A joint Tunisia-European Union (EU) statement was adopted at the end of the Prime Minister's recent official visit to Brussels. The two sides agreed on the following priorities: ensuring co-ordination in the employment and vocational training fields, immediately setting up a joint European-Tunisian businessmen's council, and resuming talks on farm products, trade liberalization and a full free-trade agreement between Tunisia and the EU, to pave the way for a gradual integration into the Union's internal market, with a view to setting up a common economic space. In addition, it was agreed to establish discussions on the liberalization of air transport and dialogue on migration, mobility and security and the opening of talks on the assessment of the conformity of industrial products (the electrical industries and building materials, in addition to the priority given to 'assets recovery').

The EU confirmed its commitment towards supporting the reform of the security sector, justice and the media, as well as the transitional judicial process. The Union will increase its assistance to civil society organizations as well as the consolidation of co-operation in the field of upgrading economic and financial areas, vocational training, employment, including the development of small and medium-sized enterprises.

The success of the first free, transparent and democratic elections in Tunisia confirms the appropriateness and credibility of the OSCE/MPC co-operation at several levels. It highlighted the important role of the exchange of expertise and the lessons learnt in the democratic transition, particularly through assistance in electoral processes.

In this regard, we are of the view that the OSCE Permanent Council shall take note and build on the recent strengthening of OSCE/MPC co-operation, thus sending out a positive political message designed to encourage interested countries to consolidate and expand their consultation and co-operation with the OSCE and to contribute to the strengthening of the credibility and effectiveness of the Organization.

In this context and following the success of the electoral observation mission of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Tunisia, a cooperation programme is being finalized with ODIHR related inter alia to the reform of electoral legislation and human rights.

Our approach to the co-operation which is desired between the OSCE and the partners is coupled by a call for the identification of a new vision among the Mediterranean partners and a discerning treatment for the benefit of these countries through the establishment of instruments for economic and social convergence resulting, in the long term, in the free


movement of goods, services, capital and people. The objective would be to give the region greater prospects and to build a common space capable of exploiting synergies between the economies of the region and consolidating social harmony, growth and sustainable development in the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

We are confident that our OSCE partners will continue to strengthen the partnership process on the basis of mutual interests and a win-win partnership because we are convinced that the success of the Tunisian experience, which we believe in and are working on relentlessly, will definitely have an impact beyond its borders. Our success will also be shared by our partners.

Nowadays, challenges that threaten prosperity, stability, democracy and the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms do not recognize borders, nationalities or regions.

Tunisia is embarking on a difficult, but rewarding path leading to the full establishment of the rule of law, human rights, equality, freedom and good governance. We are confident that common responses and coordinated and concerted actions are essential to avoid the stage of serious difficulties often seen in democratic transitions, a situation which our economy and society cannot afford to endure. Tunisia can and will rely on its own forces. Effective support from the international community is instrumental in order to bring the process to a successful end.





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Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

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