

**CONVEGNO INTERNAZIONALE
SPECIALE MAGHREB**

**Il Maghreb tra compromesso nazionale, staticità incerta, sfida jihadista,
dissoluzione tribale. Dimensione politica e ricadute economiche
(Milano 7 ottobre 2015)**

**THE TUNISIAN DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION, KEY ACHIEVEMENTS AND
CHALLENGES**

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Between 2011 and 2015, Tunisia achieved several decisive objectives. It organized two peaceful elections, and succeeded in realizing a peaceful transition. The National Constituent Assembly managed to write a new constitution that was adopted by 209 deputies in January 2014. Although the NCA worked in a tensed context, marked by important transformations in the neighboring countries, and domestic instability –with recurrent strikes and two political assassinations– it opened a wide and pluralist debate with the broader society. Contrary to what happened in Egypt or Libya, Islamists have been included into the political competition and have built alliances with their former partners or former opponents. A dynamic and vigilant public sphere has formed, with an increase of the number of civic associations, new media, artistic performances, political parties and social movements. For all these reasons, it has become common to describe Tunisia as the only “success”¹ of the Arab Spring, and to draw comparisons with the catastrophic situation of Libya and Syria, that are torn apart by civil war, and with the victory of the counter-revolution in Egypt. It is important, however, to use the “success” narrative with caution, and to question the methodological relevance of this comparison. Indeed it is unclear how Tunisia can be compared with Syria, given the profound differences between the size of the population, the religious landscapes of the two countries, and their strategic positioning. Likewise, the differences in the history of state formation in Libya and Tunisia render any quick comparison problematic. The more common comparison with Egypt is also tricky, not only due to the difference of the role of the military, but also to the presence of a significant Coptic minority and a very different history of trade unions. In other words, the presence of authoritarian regimes, the Arabic language and the reference to Islam may not be sufficient factors to justify lumping together the various Arab countries that

¹ Nadia Marzouki and Hamza Meddeb, « Tunisia : democratic miracle or mirage », http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/21863/tunisia_democratic-miracle-or-mirage

have undergone significant change since 2011. It may be more productive to think of other types of comparisons beyond the traditional framework of area studies, such as, for example, a comparison between Tunisia and Italy, or Egypt and Chile.

Several factors explain the positive outcomes of the Tunisian transition. The sociology and history of the country constitute favorable structural conditions (a relatively homogeneous society in terms of religious and ethnic identity; the presence of a strong middle class, with a decent level of education...). The history of the formation of political opposition has also been a key factor. During the Ben Ali era, moderate Islamists and moderate secularists learned to talk and work together within associations such as the Human Rights League or the Collectif of October 2005. Finally, the power balance among political forces has been a major ingredient of the process of compromise making. An *équilibre de l'impuissance* defines the relationship among the major political parties since 2011 in Tunisia. Despite the fears alternately triggered by the victory of Ennahda or Nida Tounes, no side is powerful enough to govern alone, and to gain full hegemony over politics and society².

Despite all the significant achievements of the past years, Tunisia still needs to confront important challenges, in a context marked by an increased security threat and a dire economic situation³.

- The claim to social justice was at the heart of the 2011 protests. Yet, this objective is far from being realized. The unemployment of the general population and the youth remains very high. Protests, strikes and social movements in all professional sectors remain important and recurrent⁴.
- The process of transitional justice, which is enshrined in the new constitution, and the creation of the Instance for Truth and Dignity, is currently threatened by a bill, (proposed by Beji Caïd Essebsi and Nida Tounes) for financial and economic reconciliation. This bill proposes to grant pardon without judgment to businessmen that were involved in corruption scandals and cronyism, in exchange for a fine. Civil society and political opponents have fiercely criticized this project as an attempt to give amnesty to corrupt figures of the former regime.
- The realization of institutions that are planned by the new constitution will be a decisive test of the degree of democratic commitment of the government led by Nida Tounes. More specifically, the discussion that is occurring within the assembly and parties about the establishment of the Constitutional Court will be crucial. While a parliamentary group had proposed a project in early September, the ministry of Justice has proposed a competing project in an attempt to bypass the work and prerogatives of the Assembly. This intervention raises the question of how to establish an independent constitutional court if there is no guarantee that a really open and democratic consultation of deputies will lead to it?

² Nadia Marzouki, « Tunisia's rotten compromise », MERIP, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero071015>

³ Hamza Meddeb, « The politics of economic reform », forthcoming, Carnegie Middle East Center.

⁴ Stefano Pontiggia, « Redeyef, ou l'espoir déçu de la Tunisie des marges », <http://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/reportages/redeyef-ou-l-espoir-d-u-de-la-tunisie-des-marges-278252055>

