

Tunisia's democratisation: is Europe rising to the occasion?

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>> Disappointing' is the word Tunisian actors most frequently use to describe the European response to the Tunisian revolution so far. Drawing from extensive interviews with key Tunisian actors, this brief examines the reasons for this disappointment. Not all is bleak; some aspects of the European response have won appreciation from Tunisians. But criticism exceeds appreciation of what the EU has done so far. Not all Tunisian criticism of the EU may be entirely fair; a large share is directed mainly at individual European states. But this report offers pointers that policy-makers should heed, on where Tunisians would like to see improvement in their relations with the Union.

The disappointment felt by many Tunisian actors is multi-layered. Some sources of disenchantment are by now well known, but have yet to subside. There was the early disappointment at the perceived meagerness of initial aid efforts. In April, Tunisian Minister of Trade and Tourism Mehdi Houas expressed his dismay at the '17 petits millions d'euros' of EU assistance, referring to the initial EU package announced in February to aid the democratic transition. There is a resurgent indignation that Europe did so little to help promote human rights and democracy during the long Ben Ali years. Much ire is still directed against France for its multiple missteps in Tunisia. Then Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot Marie's by now infamous actions were not isolated events. The French government's authorisation of the sale of tear gas to Tunisia as the uprising was gaining momentum, the Minister of Culture and Communication Frédéric Mitterrand's defense of the Ben Ali regime and the actions of a number of other French personalities, including the new French ambassador in Tunis, have ensured a steady stream of additional axes to grind. Italy's single-minded preoccupation with migration is also criticised.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Tunisians are disappointed with European responses to the revolution.
- Tunisian expectations of Europe are focused less on assistance in building democratic institutions, and more on changing the Euro-Tunisian relationship as a whole.
- Tunisians would welcome swifter action on the return of looted funds, a clearer future vision for EU-Tunisian relations, and mobility; a more muted tone in the debate on illegal migration is also desired.

»»»»» Beyond such issues, there is the disappointment growing out of what could be called a *décalage*, or discrepancy, between Tunisian expectations and European commitments. At the basis of this *décalage* is the fact that Tunisian demands for support for its democratic revolution do not focus primarily on assistance in building democratic institutions. While expecting such assistance, many Tunisians fear that it may also amount to interference. Tunisian expectations are instead centered on the relationship between Europe and Tunisia as a whole. In a sense, Tunisians are hoping to revolutionise their external relations as well as their internal politics. Tunisians feel they should now be treated according to the values of the club of Western democracies. At this level, European countries—if not always the EU as such—has so far disappointed badly. Criticism focuses on the funds looted by Ben Ali and stashed away in European banks; European failure to engage with civil society demands regarding debt relief; the lack of a clear vision for future relations; and the treatment of Tunisian migrants and visitors to Europe.

THE POSITIVE ASPECTS

Tunisians that have come into direct contact with European initiatives since the revolution are generally positive. ‘I was at the European Parliament and I understood then that the Europeans have realised that they have made an error of judgment as regards us Tunisians’, says Messaoud Romdhani, a member of the Haute instance pour la réalisation des objectifs de la révolution, de la réforme politique et de la transition démocratique. The organisations and political parties that have received visits and benefited from exchanges with representatives of European governments and NGOs are also generally welcoming, at least as concerns the principle of support: ‘The open dialogue between civil society, political parties and the Europeans is positive and interesting and it helps build confidence’, says Ajmi Lourimi, a member of Ennadha’s Executive Committee. Here also, there are voices of deception, however: ‘Look at

the refugee camps on our borders and compare to the foreign-sponsored seminars in 5-star hotels—why such a waste of resources?’ wonders blogger Fatma Riahi. There is also generally a wariness of outside interference in the democratisation process.

The new interest that the revolution has generated in European states such as Germany, Poland and the Scandinavian countries is generally viewed as positive. ‘We are interested in new friendships in addition to the traditional ones’, PDP party representative Ahmed Bouazzi underlines. Also, several interviewees stressed that they were positively surprised by the Spanish response, which they see as rapid and supportive: Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero was an early visitor in Tunis.

Although there has been disappointment regarding the levels of financial assistance, such sentiments may well recede if offers of financial assistance translate into concrete and swift action on the ground. Levels of assistance similar to those offered to Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communism, as hoped for by *Réalités* journalist Azza Turki, are not (yet) on the table. But within the last few weeks, the substantial G8 offers of assistance coupled with additional pledges of bilateral assistance were greeted with satisfaction in Tunisia. As stressed by European diplomats interviewed for this study, the ball will then be in the camp of the Tunisian government, which has to show that it has credible and sustainable plans for spending the funds. The Tunisian government, one diplomat stressed, will also have to stop playing one donor against another, going for ‘easy’ French and Italian money offered without any strings attached.

THE DISCREPANCIES

The return of looted funds has been one of the main issues brought to the fore by Tunisian civil society since the revolution: it has been the focus of demonstrations, online debate and is a

recurrent topic in the mainstream media. It is seen by many Tunisian actors as a moral imperative, not least since the money is a potent symbol of the close links between the Ben Ali regime and European countries, and of the fact that European businesses gained from Ben Ali's rule. The restitution of the Ben Ali-Trabelsi funds is also seen as an issue of justice and a test case for the rule of law.

There is increasing recognition within Tunisia that part of the blame for the lack of advancement on this dossier must be put on the Tunisian interim government. As noted by a European

diplomatic source in Tunis, the Tunisian government has established a very narrow list of only 43 persons suspected of embezzlement. It omits many well-known criminal operators, including union and business bosses known for their corruption.

If the dossier has received much attention in Tunisia, it seems to have a low profile within the EU. Switzerland is to date the only country publicly to have stated the full amount of money frozen in its banks, CHF 60 million (EUR 46 million). A European diplomat confirmed that EU civil servants working on Tunisia do not have information regarding the assets of Tunisian origin currently frozen in individual member states. There is also no review process foreseen for the Council decision regarding the freezing.

Debt relief is a second main issue brought up by civil society actors, including the UGTT trade union, the Tunisian Bar Association and various NGOs. It also garners support within the reformist branch of the main business organization UTICA. Debt relief is not uncontroversial, however, and a number of

Tunisian economists and political party representatives point out that Tunisia's debt levels are manageable and that debt relief may make future borrowing more difficult and costly. 'While the symbolic gesture would be nice, we are capable of reimbursing our debt,' PDP Executive Committee member Bouazzi stresses – a view shared by Ennadha party representatives.

Again, on the EU side, this has so far been a no-go. 'This is a false issue', EU representative Dirk Buda stated, 'debt levels are below the EU average'. EU officials insist that technically the Union cannot get into the issue of debt relief unless there is IMF involvement and an IMF-EU agreement on additional needs, which is currently not the case.

Tunisian actors stress the urgent need for a clear European vision for the future, beyond the advanced status that could serve as an anchor for the revolution. 'We have made a revolution in record time... that merits a little more drive [on the part of the EU]', one minister stressed in an interview with a French newspaper. Many other Tunisian actors agree, slamming European '*attentisme*'. There is a consensus that an advanced status does not constitute an adequate vision, not least since it has already been granted to non-democratic states such as Morocco and Jordan. There is no agreement on the exact status sought, however. Some mention a status similar to that of Switzerland and Norway, others the status currently enjoyed by Israel.

Migration and mobility is a widely reported source of disunity. To many Tunisian actors, the main message to have come out of Europe since the revolution is not European expressions of support and admiration or promises of substantial financial assistance, but the treatment of the 20,000 Tunisians landing on Lampedusa in the early spring. 'It hurts' and 'Please stop making such a big affair out of this', are recurrent comments. 'A minimum of respect would have been expected. The Tunisian migrants were not even properly fed and the authorities did not let humanitarian organisations or Tunisians already



Tunisians are hoping to revolutionise their external relations as well as their internal politics

»»»»» there come to the rescue. This is shocking coming from our traditional European partners' is a statement (made by four representatives of the Committee Sauvons l'UTICA) that well sums up the general sentiment.

Although European officials stress the important difference in legal status between the mainly economic migrants leaving Tunisia and the refugees fleeing war-ravaged Libya (and in general warmly welcomed into Tunisia), Tunisian actors regularly compare the two. Thus, for example, interim Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi said in an interview with a French magazine: 'Do you realize, 160,000 immigrants suddenly coming to us is... the equivalent of one million immigrants going to France in a few days. I don't even dare imagine the panic. I am not giving anyone any lessons, but I believe that democracy means precisely this: to solve smoothly problems that appear naturally in a society.'

At a more general level, increased mobility is undoubtedly the main demand on the Tunisian side at present. It is both an important issue of principle and a very practical concern for most Tunisians: 'The politics of closed borders is inadmissible in the 21st century', Nadia Hakimi, Executive Director of the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates stressed. Reformist UTICA members underlined the pragmatic side: 'The visa regime and the circulation of businessmen in Europe must be facilitated. Similarly, we need a migratory strategy for young people with diplomas to decrease the pressure of unemployment within Tunisia.'

Many within the European Commission seem to understand these demands. The Commission's Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity includes some tentative elements on mobility, and the recent New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood document proposes a Mobility Partnership with Tunisia. It also calls on member states to make full use of flexible visas as offered by the EU Visa Code.

However, it is unclear whether the Commission can get key EU countries, including France and Italy, on its side. The omens are not good, given that the temporary acceptance by Italy of the 20,000 Tunisians from Lampedusa has led to such considerable intra-EU tensions, with the French re-imposing border controls to prevent the Tunisians from crossing into France. As confirmed by a European diplomat, dealing with the mobility issue is 'very difficult because of the rise of the extreme right in many quarters in Europe and the presidential elections in France coming up.'

Less discussed have been the discrepancies over social activism. Put crudely, there is a stark difference between a Tunisian public which is in many ways in its finest hour, discussing democratic principles, solidarity with the displaced, how to lift Tunisians from the interior out of poverty, how to ensure a better future for their children and grandchildren, etc. with a European public that is often described as fearful of the future and lacking a clear *projet de société*.

Some Tunisians also express a certain disappointment with European civil society and the European public. 'Civil society in Europe should express its solidarity with Tunisia' the head of the Centre for Mediterranean and International Studies Ahmed Driss stresses, 'Currently, it is only politicians that talk'. Others take a similar view: 'European civil society organisations are with us, but they have not had the success that we have had in changing realities. Now, it is up to them to be equally efficient!' says a member of the Haute instance. There is a sense that expressions of regret for past European actions vis-à-vis Tunisia have been slow to materialise: 'There is no humility. The vision is one of mistrust and arrogance. Europe would need to go through a profound introspection', says Omar Mestiri, director of Radio Kalima, a long-standing opposition radio station.

That principles are at the forefront in the current Tunisian debate is also reflected in

demands for a redefined relationship: ‘we hope for a change in attitudes, a relation of friendship, based on mutual respect and equality. This is our dream, a dream of another relationship’. Many Tunisians stress the importance of Europe considering EU-Tunisian relations as win-win and mutually beneficial, rather tainted by security concerns and depicting Arabs as ‘the Others’.

There have been, on the European side, expressions of regret and hopes for a new beginning, perhaps most eloquently expressed by Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle. It seems, however, that these have been swamped by a second line of more narrowly self-interested European discourse.

Another challenge for a Europe struggling with issues of identity and multiculturalism is the long-standing dual Tunisian identity (in some respects not unlike that of Turkey). ‘Tunisia has two doors, one leading towards Europe and the other towards the Arab world. Both sources of identity are equally important to Tunisians. Europe, by contrast, has limited understanding and knowledge of Tunisia’ according to one civil society representative. Statements such as these are confirmed in a recent opinion poll, which found that approximately 55 per cent of Tunisians thought that Tunisian society today is close to the Western model while 45 per cent found it closer to the Arab-Muslim model.

WHAT TUNISIANS WANT FROM EUROPE

For Tunisians, mobility is a key issue both for economic reasons and because there cannot be any sense, on either side, of a shared destiny as long as it is very difficult for many Tunisians even to pay a visit to Europe. This is of course a politically difficult issue in a Europe where xenophobia seems to be gaining ground in some quarters. A clearer European rejection of intolerable statements—such as those made

recently by an Italian minister suggesting the use of arms against migrants—would also help achieve greater European moral clarity on migration.

To anchor the democratic development, many Tunisians find it important that the EU establishes a single, clear offer of future status, with gradual steps along the way to achieving that status. As things now stand, there are multiple proposed partnerships in various issue areas and a global vision is lacking for what the Euro-Mediterranean space will look like ten years from now.

The Ben Ali/Trabelsi money stashed in European banks is an important moral and symbolic issue in Tunisia. In light of this, and in line with commitments made at the recent G8 summit, it would be important for each EU country to state how much money and other assets have been frozen in view of possible repatriation to Tunisia and also which banks have been holding embezzled funds—not least since those banks have clearly failed to make mandatory due diligence checks. The EU must communicate more openly on the steps that European and Tunisian authorities will have to take to ensure repatriation, and the time that this is expected to take.

If debt annulment or rescheduling is—as seems to be the case—a no-go, a more open dialogue with Tunisian civil society actors on the issue might help dispel misunderstandings. If Europe is truly to support civil society in the country, it will have to be ready to engage with it, including on demands which are not those which Europe expects or finds the most constructive.

The old interests and networks spanning the two sides of the Mediterranean are not yet broken. Ms. Alliot-Marie is most certainly not the only pro-Ben Ali European personality to believe that she did ‘nothing wrong’ in Tunisia. European countries must make sure that old networks are superseded by new links and relationships. This requires, amongst other things, that EU

6

»»»»» countries beyond Tunisia's traditional partners take a long-term, sustained interest in the country. It also requires full application of national, European and international anti-corruption legislation vis-à-vis European businesses operating in Tunisia.

European civil society organisations have been put to the test by the successes of civil society in Tunisia. Some Tunisian observers stress that European associations will need to show not only that they can work effectively with Tunisian partners during the transition, but more importantly that they can energize people within Europe so as to reinforce solidarity between the north and the south of the Mediterranean.

It would be unfair to expect a quickly and perfectly formed European response to the sudden and unexpected revolution in Tunisia. Working in Tunisia is also not without its difficulties. For example, Tunisians will have to discuss openly and be clearer about what distinguishes welcome help from undue

interference. Navigating the line between much-demanded support and derided *ingérence* is currently tricky for international actors. At the same time, the revolution has, yet again, made the perennial question regarding European leadership painfully clear: who speaks for Europe? Is it a visionary such as Štefan Füle? Is it Angela Merkel, who was very supportive of Tunisia in the early hours of the revolution? Or is it Silvio Berlusconi and his ministers? Tunisians simply don't know. In sum, with a historic opportunity offered by the Tunisian revolution, it is not yet clear that Europe is indeed rising to the occasion.

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