THREE

Tunisia

The Arab Spring began in Tunisia, where on December 17, 2010, Muhammad Bouazizi lit himself on fire in an expression of frustration at government repression and his economic plight. A wave of anti-regime protests followed and quickly spread to other Arab countries. Tunisia's president and dictator for twenty-three years, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, fled the country on January 14, 2011, leaving his ruling Dustouri Party to try to pick up the pieces. By March, however, further protests had forced the party to disband and its members from their ministerial posts, paving the way for Beji Caid Essebsi's interim government to take charge. This government ruled the country until elections in October 2011 brought the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) to power.

Ben Ali had seized the presidency from his predecessor, Habib Bourguiba, in a bloodless coup in 1987. Bourguiba was himself an authoritarian and had ruled Tunisia since it gained its independence from France in 1956. While Bourguiba especially played a major role in making Tunisia one of the most socially progressive countries in the Middle East and North Africa, both men were extremely repressive. They left behind legacies of imprisonments, torture, censorship, and brutal crackdowns on their opponents. While Tunisians managed to topple Ben Ali in a matter of weeks, it will take them many years to rebuild and fully transition from more than five decades of dictatorship to sustainable peace and stability. Additionally, the removal of Ben Ali created deep divisions within Tunisian society, especially between supporters of the former regimes, including groups like Nedaa Tunis and al-Mubadara (The Initiative), and those who participated in the uprising, like Islamists, Ettakatol, and the Congress for the Republic

(CPR) party. Indeed, these tensions have led to several severe political crises in the years since Ben Ali's fall.

Despite these challenges, Tunisia's political transition has gone relatively well in the five years since the revolution, and the country has become the Arab Spring's beacon of hope. Since its revolution, it has held not one but two national dialogues that have helped Tunisia's leading political parties forge compromises on its constitution and transitional justice law in spite of significant polarization. Tunisia's new constitution, ratified in January 2014, was hailed as the most progressive in the Arab world. Tunisia's inclusive and pragmatic approach to its transition has allowed it to pursue each of the essential national reconciliation processes. Truth-seeking committees are starting to function, and in the meantime, former regime members suspected of past violations are being held for trial in humane conditions and with protection from torture. Various methods of reparations are being debated and applied, and a number of judges have been dismissed. Nonetheless, the vast majority of the work on each of these national reconciliation processes is yet to be done, and Tunisia must faithfully carry it out to best situate itself for long-term stability and success.

Tunisia seems to be grappling with fewer problematic issues than Libya or Yemen in its post-dictatorship transition to civil peace. Nevertheless, the country still has significant concerns that are hindering its pursuit of national reconciliation and a stable peace. Two examples of these issues are Protection of the Revolution Committees and Salafi-liberal polarization.

Protection of Revolution Committees

On January 14, 2011, Ben Ali escaped Tunisia. Without his iron fist controlling the country, a security vacuum developed. Fears of anarchy and disorder inspired individuals in many Tunisian neighborhoods to respond by forming what later became known as Protection of the Revolution Committees (PRCs). After an interim government headed by Essebsi was formed and restored order, security became less of a concern. The role of the committees thus became less significant, but many adapted to the new reality and registered with the Ministry of the Interior as NGOs, though they continue

to call themselves PRCs. As of mid-2014 there were approximately fifteen registered PRCs in Tunisia, each containing a few dozen members.

The PRCs became a source of serious political controversy when many of their members were accused by the opposition of affiliation with the then-ruling Islamist political party, Ennahda. In fact, some Tunisians described the PRCs as "the armed wing of Ennahda."[1] The role of PRCs in Tunisia's post-revolution period became even more controversial when some of their members were accused of being part of a group that attacked and caused the death of Lutfi Nageth, a Tunisian politician affiliated with the then-opposition party Nedaa Tunis, in the city of Tatwain in October 2012. The cause of death is hotly disputed as the medical report stated that Nageth died of a heart attack, while the courts charged ten people with his death. Two of the ten were allegedly Ennahda affiliates, which reinforced the accusation that the PRCs represent the armed wing of Ennahda.[2]

The Tunisian government, which until January 2014 was headed by an Ennahda-led troika coalition, refused to dissolve the PRCs. Ennahda argued for maintaining the PRCs as they were registered with the Ministry of the Interior, had well-defined structures, and were acting in accordance with the law. According to Ennahda politician Said Ferjani, "The executive branch should never dissolve a registered organization simply because this will become a precedent for the government to arbitrarily dissolve other registered organizations. The judiciary, not political decisions, is the authority to terminate the work of a specific organization when violations happen. Who knows who will be in power next! Allowing such a precedent could be manipulated by upcoming governments to silence opposition."[3]

Despite his opposition to dissolving PRCs except through the judicial system, Ferjani conceded that the name of these groups, "Protection of the Revolution," has an exclusionary tone. He agreed that the name infers that the committees have a monopoly on the protection of the Tunisian revolution. Ferjani said, "Revolution is a continuous and cumulative project. It started decades ago and many people contributed to the revolution. There were those who died before they saw freedom. It is therefore not very accurate that some groups today monopolize the cause of revolution protection."[4]

An important dimension of understanding the politics of PRCs is the context of mistrust that engulfs Tunisia's transitional phase. This mistrust explains the opposition's concerns about the exact operations and goals of the PRCs. Suspicion of them was exacerbated by the Nageth killing. Additionally, PRCs clashed with the powerful Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), contributing to the buildup of tensions between that organization and Ennahda, and the deterioration of trust between the groups.

The concerns of the opposition about the existence of PRCs are totally understandable. The opposition, however, should assess whether dissolving the PRCs through a political decision would genuinely serve the long-term democratic transition in Tunisia. In fact, it is in the opposition's interests to channel efforts to dissolve the PRCs not through parliament but strictly through the judicial system. Dissolving organizations through the NCA or the executive will confuse the democratic process and prevent the separation of powers. Instead of lobbying the NCA and protesting in the streets, the opposition should focus on collecting solid evidence of illegal PRC behavior to present in court. This would make the PRCs more careful about behaving according to the law, lessening concerns that they would act as intimidators. Holding PRCs accountable to legal standards will only strengthen the democratic transition and rule of law, and contribute to creating common ground where all parties can work together.

Salafi-Liberal Polarization

Tunisia also faces at least one kind of polarization that is more extreme than in other Arab cases: the vast—and growing—divide between secular liberals and ultraconservative Salafi Islamists. In fact, polarization between Islamism and secularism in Tunisia manifests itself in many ways including between Islamist Ennahda and several secular left parties. However, what makes this polarization significantly sharper and a threat to the transition process in Tunisia is the involvement of Salafists who take it to a new level that includes the use of violence. Another layer of polarization also exists within the Islamists themselves, in particular between ultraconservative Salafists and the moderate Ennahda party.

Tunisian secularism is vibrant and unparalleled in the Arab world. Under Bourguiba and Ben Ali, Tunisia was, for example, the only Arab country to ban the hijab in state institutions. Its jihadi Salafis, meanwhile, demand a purely religious state and have shown their willingness to attack cultural activities they deem un-Islamic.[5] Thus, the two parties are both at extremes, one banning the hijab and the other attacking cultural activities. This is not to suggest that either one of them is right, but the sheer distance between these two cultural extremes makes the likelihood that they will coalesce around one vision for the state rather slim, while a confrontation, possibly even a violent one, is certainly a possibility and may very well be in the making.

Moreover, Salafis, who were imprisoned or driven underground before the revolution, have been growing in strength. Jailed Salafi leaders, including Abu Ayadh, the leader of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, were released as part of the country's post-revolution amnesty. Ansar al-Sharia's annual conference in 2012 attracted roughly five thousand attendees, and an estimated fifty thousand were expected to participate in the 2013 conference in Kairouan before the government decided to prevent the conference by force and blocked the roads leading to the city.[6]

This huge ideological gap between liberals and Salafis has left the moderate Islamist Ennahda party, almost by default, to occupy the Tunisian middle. The upshot is that one can witness Ennahda figures being described—often simultaneously—as closet fundamentalists by liberals and as infidels and tyrants by Salafis. Rafik Abdul Salam, a former foreign minister of Tunisia and Ennahda leader, explained, "Salafis accuse us of being infidels [for not representing Islam well] and the Tunisian left accuses us of allying with the radicals [for not being tough enough on Salafis]."[7]

Salafi-liberal polarization is occasionally exacerbated by violent incidents, which raise serious concerns about the possibility of coexistence between the two groups amid the deterioration of security in the country. In the five years after the revolution, NCA members Chokri Belaid and Mohamed al-Brahmi were assassinated, tourists were targeted in bombings in the cities of Sousse and Monstir, the Bardo museum in Tunis was attacked in March 2015 leaving twenty-one tourists dead, and a number of

violent clashes took place between the Tunisian Army and extremist groups in the Sha'anbi Mountains. Especially after the government labeled Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist organization, fears of an impending security crisis have become more pronounced. In February 2014, Interior Minister Lotfi Ben Jeddou announced that Tunisia's National Guard had killed Kamel Gadhgadhi, the Islamist extremist who was the chief suspect in Belaid's assassination.[8]

With the increased level of individual freedoms and openness in post–Arab Spring Tunisia, it is unlikely that either the radical Salafis or the liberal left will be able to marginalize or eliminate the other. Tunisians will have to learn that peaceful coexistence between different viewpoints is the best way to deal with this polarization. To replace polarization with sustainable coexistence on the one hand, and to effectively respond to violence on the other, Tunisians need to embrace a strategy built on three pillars: rule of law, socioeconomic development, and enlightenment.

Rule of Law: Tunisia's liberals must understand that Salafis, first and foremost, are Tunisian citizens. Like all other Tunisians, they have the full rights associated with their citizenship. They are free to assemble and advocate for their beliefs, and the state should protect them as long as they remain committed to non-violence. Ennahda leader Said Ferjani argued that "the state must deal with the Salafi violence firmly and all within the rule of law. This is necessary first for the state to establish and maintain order, and second to ensure the rights of the non-violent Salafis—the Scientific Salafis—to practice their beliefs."[9]

Socioeconomic Development: A major cause of the revolution and the subsequent radicalization and violence is underdevelopment. It is no surprise that the violence and clashes that occurred with the police in May 2013 took place in Tadamun, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Tunis. The state must face these realities and implement economic development policies in these areas.

Enlightenment: "Counter Salafism by Malekism," said Ferjani. While Salafism leans toward conservatism and extremism, Malekism focuses on knowledge, reason, and enlightenment. The majority of Tunisia's Sunni Muslims follow the Maleki school of Fiqh, or Islamic jurisprudence.

Kairouan, about one hundred miles south of Tunis, is the capital of Malekism, and Al-Zaytouna in Tunis is one of the Muslim world's first universities. Ferjani pointed out that "Tunisia defeated Fatemism and rejected Wahhabism by Malekism. Our Maleki ancestors would not accept their teaching being hijacked by Salafism today. Our ancestors taught us how to fight with knowledge and that is how we can face Salafism today."[10] Alia Alani, an historian at Manouba University and specialist in Islamic movements, explained that in 1803, the founder of Wahhabism sent a strong letter to the governor of Tunisia, Hamouda Basha, asking him to follow the conservative Wahhabist school of thought. It was said that the governor consulted the Maleki scholars at Al-Zaytouna and twenty of them drafted a response rebutting—from a religious point of view—the principles of Wahhabism.[11] Tunisia's long history of moderate Islam should be highlighted in order to combat extremism.