

**THE COMING OF THE “ARAB AUTUMN”:
LESSONS LEARNED FROM TUNISIA’S DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION***Daniel Novotný**

As Tunisian election officials last week confirmed the Islamist Ennahda party as winner of the first free election in this North African nation’s history, the European Union was essentially faced with a dilemmatic situation. On the one hand, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton welcomed the elections for the Constituent Assembly of Tunisia as historic, stressing that they “mark the beginning of a new era in Tunisia.” Yet, on the other, EU policymakers privately admit their concerns and uneasiness about what is likely to be the first Islamist-led government in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings and what this will mean for Europe and its security in the near and medium term. While watching carefully to see how Tunisia’s Islamists will exercise their newly-gained political power, the EU should develop and implement a balanced approach to this North African country that combines keen interest (supporting the new government and institutions) and restraint (not to be seen as meddling into the country’s domestic affairs). Ultimately, the EU needs to show unconditional solidarity with the Tunisian people, deliver adequate economic assistance to the country’s struggling economy and provide unwavering sizable support for the country’s civil society in dealing with the many challenges of Tunisia’s transition to democracy.

The Arab Spring that is slowly rolling over into the “Arab Autumn” has recently witnessed two of its most significant and dramatic events – the feared Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi was killed by rebels after being seized in a sewage tunnel in his home town of Sirte and the first free and fair election in Tunisia’s history brought victory to the country’s previously banned Islamist party, Ennahda. Admittedly, from the European perspective, both of these events would have clearly been – not so long ago – beyond anybody’s wildest dreams. Tunisia’s Ben Ali, Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi and other authoritarian leaders and their regimes were for decades backed by the EU and other Western powers in what was seen as a trade-off for stability in the region and for Europe’s own security interests, in particular to achieve a better control of immigration flows across the Mediterranean. Thus, much like Indonesia’s long-time dictator Suharto using the alleged communist conspiracy and “China threat” to the country’s sovereignty to legitimize his rule during the Cold War, different authoritarian regimes in North Africa previously secured Western support for their continued rule to a great extent by exploiting Western fears of a potential Islamist uprising and subsequent takeover of the state.

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However, this is where similarity between Tunisia and Libya ends. In terms of the transition from an authoritarian regime to a democracy, whereas Libya's has been marked by violence and atrocities perpetuated by both sides that climaxed with a widely publicized killing of the country's dictator, Tunisia's generally peaceful revolution and the recent free election can serve as an inspiration and a template for other Arab countries to emulate. It is the EU's hope that, rather than Libya's tortuous and bloody path to democracy, it is Tunisia's peaceful transition that will set the precedent for the upcoming elections in Morocco and mainly the strategically important Egypt. To that end, there is one key question that has long plagued the minds of many in Europe: what if new democratic freedoms allow Islamists, sidelined for decades by secularist elites, to take power? (Hence a scenario that EU policymakers and elites in general have until recently found unthinkable and unacceptable.) Ennahda's landslide victory in Sunday's vote has, at least in part, provided several possible answers to this vexing question.

First of all, the overwhelmingly secular nature of the Arab Spring movement has effectively undermined presumptions about the strength and popularity of Islamist movements. (It is quite telling that previously Western analysts had frequently placed al-Qaeda and other radical Islamist organizations at the center of their analyses as the most likely agents of political change in the Arab World.) Secondly, after giving birth to the Arab Spring movement, it is again Tunisia that has demonstrated that moderate Islamists can win an election without causing a crisis. There is a hope that Ennahda's victory will strengthen the position of moderate Islamists in their contest with hardliners for influence in the streets of Cairo, Tripoli and other major cities in the region. Thirdly, Tunisia's electoral system has been designed to ensure an adequate political representation of women. Under this system, Tunisian women could potentially gain at least a third of seats in the National Constituent Assembly, giving the country reportedly the highest rate, along with Morocco, of female political representation in the Arab world. It was also a positive sign that, after the election, Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi reaffirmed his party's commitment to uphold the social gains for Tunisian women and strengthen their role in political decision-making. Last but not least, in the context of Tunisia's phased democratic transition and its complex election system, no party, including Ennahda, can wield political power in its own right. Since Ennahda does not have a clear majority in the Assembly, it will be forced to form an interim coalition with its secular rivals, such as the "Congress of the Republic" party. All in all, we can expect that the Assembly is likely to be fractious as clearer divides emerge among various parties and a rather fluid political scene in the short term.

However, if the main political battle shifts to parliamentary and presidential elections likely to be held in 2013, Tunisia's stuttering economy cannot wait much longer. One of the main structural causes underlying the Arab uprisings was the pervasive economic discontent and the sense of being marginalized and disempowered among the vast tracts of the region's population. Since societies

arguably cannot sustain democracy without an advanced level of development, a new interim Tunisian government should focus, with the EU's assistance, on implementing policies aimed at reinvigorating the country's economy. The revolutionary wave in Tunisia also demonstrated that human dignity, which is closely associated with freedom and justice, is a priority especially for the country's younger generation. Bearing in mind that the Tunisians themselves referred to the Arab Spring movement as the "Revolution of Dignity", the new Tunisian government should implement a human-security centered approach – ensuring that all social groups, particularly the most economically vulnerable members of the community, are provided with at least minimal social support, the resources are divided equally and the access to political and economic power is not made exclusive only to a small group of privileged individuals. For its part, the EU should support the democratization process and economic development in Tunisia as human security-centered issues, namely by empowering human rights organizations, promoting and supporting social programs such as gender equality, health and education, and highlighting possible human rights abuses.

As the relatively recent experience of Central and Eastern European countries has shown, democratic transformation is not a smooth and painless process. What Tunisia can learn from their experience is that the transition from the totalitarian regime to a pluralistic one must involve establishing free media and institutions which are capable of delivering the rule of law and respect for human and civil rights, while concurrently preventing at least the most flagrant cases of corruption and abuses of power from occurring. In this context, one must also realize the importance of responsive and responsible elites that, of course, do not emerge overnight. Tunisia's election has been only one important step in a protracted political process that is only just beginning. Despite many obstacles lying ahead, a new political culture in the country is slowly emerging and taking hold and hence, up until now, Tunisians have every reason to feel proud.

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