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[The Fight for Democracy](#)

On the Emergence of an Arab Democracy

Social Divides and Political Compromises in Tunisia

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Hopes for a life in freedom and dignity, which had materialised in the “Arab Spring”, have long since been shattered in many places. Tunisia is the only country that has succeeded in undergoing democratic change since 2011. Social divides have been dealt with in a spirit of dialogue and consensus. In order to embed democracy and the rule of law with lasting effect, however, the gap between elites and citizens as well as the regional imbalances of power and development need to be overcome.

It is either us or them. One of the reasons democratic change faltered in most of the Arab world after the upheavals of 2010/2011, was the intransigent fierceness with which the fight for power was conducted in many places. Egypt is a typical example of how the fighting between al-Sisi’s military regime and the supporters of the toppled Muslim Brotherhood blocked all political development. In Syria, the brutal suppression of the opposition movement by the regime triggered a vicious cycle of violence that plunged the country into civil war, allowing terrorist groups to flourish. In Libya, two governments, one based in the west and one in the east of the country, opposed each other for a long time, each claiming sole legitimacy. But when political victory or defeat no longer determines who is in power and has influence, but instead has an impact on the physical existence of entire groups of the population, the region will find no peace.

Tunisia demonstrates that there is an alternative. The Northern African country has managed its democratisation process successfully by making conscious efforts towards consensus, dialogue and inclusion. The virtually unanimous adoption of a new constitution on 27 January 2014 and the free elections in the same year, followed by a peaceful change of power, marked the formal conclusion of Tunisia’s political transition. The key to the peaceful and democratic change was the way in which the process of negotiation dealt with the social conflicts that exist in Tunisia just as in most of the other Arab countries.

From the overthrow of the regime in 2011 until today, development in Tunisia has been characterised by a double compromise: between revolution and continuity and between modernists and Islamists. Other areas of conflict, however, have not yet been dealt with and therefore harbour the potential to disturb the social order, create political instability or even a relapse into authoritarian models of government. First and foremost, there is the rupture between the centre and the periphery, i.e. the imbalance of power and prosperity between the capital and coastal region on the one hand, and the neglected inland regions on the other. Another divide that is becoming increasingly apparent is that between the ruling elites and a frustrated population that is consequently turning away from political processes. International partners must keep an eye on this development so they can provide assistance to Tunisia in a purposeful and sustainable way.

First Compromise: Between Revolution and Continuity

Dégage! Demonstrators shouted the French expletive for “Get out!” at their autocratic ruler on the Avenue Bourguiba in Tunis on 14 January 2011. “The people want the fall of the regime!” was another unmistakable popular slogan of the Tunisian revolution, which was soon echoed beyond the country’s borders. The protests were directed against a status quo that people had come to find increasingly unbearable. They were aimed at the corrupt ruling clique, and at

the entire system, whose nepotism only created greater unemployment instead of prospects for the future, leaving citizens at the mercy of arbitrary acts of state authorities and a repressive police apparatus. After President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali had fled, some allies of the regime, led by Mohamed Ghannouchi, who had held the office of Prime Minister since 1999, attempted a gentle change through a moderate opening up and by involving some established opposition groups. But further demonstrations followed, which became known as Kasbah I and Kasbah II, named after the seat of government in Tunis, in front of which the protests were held. The young revolutionaries wanted a complete break with the *ancien régime*.

The young revolutionaries called for a complete break with the *ancien régime*.

There is also, however, a distinct affinity with the state apparent in Tunisia, particularly among the urban middle class. This has resulted not least from pride about the progressive achievements made since independence, such as the relatively well-developed education system and the advances in women's rights, which are unparalleled in the rest of the Arab world. In view of the fact that Tunisia is a relatively small country with few natural resources, "continuity of the nation" and stability are valued particularly highly as prerequisites of national sovereignty. It was not by chance that the reestablishment of the "prestige and authority of the state" (*haybat ad-dawla*) was one of the most popular election campaign promises of the successful presidential candidate Béji Caid Essebsi in 2014. However much Tunisians may be annoyed by the bloated, bureaucratic and partly corrupt administration, people frequently show their relief over, or even appreciation of the fact that the administration simply carried on working after the overthrow of Ben Ali's 23-year rule – and has continued to do so through all the turbulent years of the transition.

Reflecting this dialectic, the Tunisian transformation process soon levelled off between radical change and continuity. While the Ghannouchi government, which included many former Ben Ali allies, had to resign under pressure from the street, the "establishment" took back control with Béji Caid Essebsi's appointment as interim prime minister on 27 February 2011. Essebsi, who had held various government positions from the 1960s, embodied the continuation of the Tunisian project of nation and state building from the independence era. He had also withdrawn from politics 20 years earlier and had therefore distanced himself sufficiently from the excesses particularly of the last years of the Ben Ali regime. Popular with the people and statesmanlike at the same time, Essebsi quickly undertook a number of steps of symbolic significance as interim prime minister, such as dissolving the state party RCD, the two chambers of parliament and the political police as well as suspending the 1956 constitution. This meant that the "revolutionaries" who advocated an even more radical new start were no longer able to mobilise the public. Their attempt at a "Kasbah III" failed. It was Essebsi himself who finally told the last few remaining demonstrators in front of the seat of government to go home.

In parallel with these developments, three commissions were formed. These emerged from traditional opposition groups and revolutionary social movements and comprised their representatives as well as legal experts. The most important of these was the "Higher Authority for Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transition". The commission, also known as the Ben Achour Commission after its chairman, acted as a type of consultative "revolutionary parliament" until the elections. Legally, this was a dubious construct, as the interim prime minister had been appointed by the now defunct regime and nobody had elected the commission members. But it managed to unite the continuity of the state (embodied by the head of government Essebsi) with the legitimacy of the revolution (embodied by the Higher Authority) credibly.¹

With the election results of 23 October 2011, the Tunisians then made it clear once again that they wanted a new political start. The three parties that explicitly invoked the legacy of Ben Ali's state party, the RCD, did not even achieve four per cent of the votes in total. The results of the greatly splintered "modernist" camp, whose parties were dominated by the urban liberal elites, also fell short of expectations. The Islamist party *Ennahda* (37 per cent), which formerly had been banned and persecuted, embodied the desire for a break with the *ancien régime* particularly strongly and attracted the highest share of the votes, followed by the Congress for the Republic (CPR) as the second-strongest party with 8.7 per cent. Its chairman, the human rights activist Moncef Marzouki, who became president soon afterwards, had very explicitly been advocating a "revolutionary agenda" (at that time still following a more secular-progressive line, while placing more stress on Tunisia's Arab-Islamic identity in later years).

However, the subsequent "troika government" (including the social-democratic *Ettakatol* in addition to *Ennahda* and the CPR) itself now reverted to the tools of patronage and nepotism that were familiar from the old regime. Providing their own supporters with jobs (particularly in the public sector) resulted in an "additional layer" of already existing bureaucracy apparatus. The left-wing intellectual Aziz Krichen, who was an advisor in Marzouki's presidential office and subsequently resigned after having become disillusioned, expressed his bitterness about this government under the leadership of the then *Ennahda* Secretary General Hamadi Jebali: "Denying the logic of the revolutionary break, it instead sought cooperation with the persons and networks of the Ben Ali system – with the naïve ulterior motive of flattering them, winning them over and ultimately having them work for their own benefit."²

On the opposition side, the foundation of *Nidaa Tounes* as a collective anti-Islamist movement allowed the reintegration of former RCD supporters, including regional and local structures of the former state party that were important

for voter mobilisation. Instead of the still discredited Ben Ali, the 'anciens' now invoked the national-enlightened tradition of the state's founding father Bourguiba, whose identity-endowing legacy Essebsi and his entourage knew to revitalise. And it worked. Particularly the middle class in the coastal regions now perceived the danger of Islamisation (and thereby the end of the Bourguibist project of the modern and progressive nation state) to be greater than that of authoritarian restoration. At the same time, the deteriorating security and economic situation meant that to many Tunisians, who were increasingly battling everyday problems, the pre-revolutionary era looked less bad.

So the reconfiguration of the political party landscape definitely allowed room for former Ben Ali supporters. Tunisia did not adopt an "exclusion law" like Libya, which categorically barred Gaddafi's followers from any participation in politics. But that did not mean a return to the status quo ante or a general amnesty for the henchmen of the old regime. At the end of 2013, the "Truth and Dignity Commission" (IVD) was set up, creating an independent (albeit controversial) transitional body of jurisprudence, intended to investigate the human rights violations perpetrated by state authorities since independence. Legal proceedings were initiated and arrest warrants issued against the members of the former ruling family, most of whom had fled abroad, and other high-ranking officials. The fact that these investigations still have public backing was illustrated in 2015 by the controversy about the "economic reconciliation" bill. Launched by President Essebsi upon taking office to facilitate the reintegration of businesspeople and functionaries, this initiative failed due to opposition from civil society (and partly from his own party members), who viewed this as a way for people to "buy their way out" of corruption charges without due process. The reintroduction of the bill in the spring of 2017 again triggered street protests and encountered resistance from various parties, including some from the modernist spectrum.




"Freedom is a daily practice": Regarding women's rights, Tunisia is the most progressive country in the Middle East and North Africa. Source: © Anis Mili, Reuters.

Thanks to the interaction between (or the mutual balancing of) the different political and civil society actors, the Tunisian transition was thus kept on a middle course between revolutionary change and continuity of state affairs and personnel. Does this mean the country has missed its opportunity to truly make a new start? Yadh Ben Achour, an expert on constitutional law, who had a significant hand in shaping the transition phase of 2011, now complains that the "current majority coalition is increasingly implicated in the return of the *'anciens'* and in blatant forms of corruption. [...] The new troika of *Ennahda*, *Nidaa* and RCD can be regarded as an extreme insult to the revolution. This is probably the price we have to pay for civil peace, even though it must break the heart of the friends of the revolution."³ In fact – particularly in view of

the bitter and frequently violent confrontations between regime and opposition, between the forces of continuity and change elsewhere in the Arab world – this "integrative" Tunisian method of transition has proved to be a feasible way of ensuring both stability and democratisation at the same time, at least so far.

Second Compromise: Between Modernists and Islamists

The debate between "Islamists" and "modernists"⁴ has a long tradition in the Arab world. It goes back to the question of how to go about catching up to the West, the need for which had become obvious and painfully noticeable by the time of the colonisation at the latest: either by copying and adopting European advances in



technology and education, for instance, up to and including religious interpretation, or instead by a return to what were seen as original Islamic values and ways of living inspired by the early days of Islam. As in other countries of the region, such as Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser, the “progressive” camp came out on top in Tunisia after independence in 1956, based ideologically on Arab nationalism (and in terms of economic policy on variations of socialism). Tunisia’s first President Habib Bourguiba, a lawyer educated in Paris and leader of the independence movement against the French protectorate, imposed a type of modernisation that disempowered the traditional religious elites and enshrined personal liberties, especially also for women. From the end of the 1970s onwards, inspired by the example of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Islamic-conservative forces organised in opposition to the secular-authoritarian regime and finally founded the *Ennahda* party, which would be prohibited until the 2011 revolution. Behind the modern façade, which the Ben Ali regime was very keen to display to raise its international reputation, Tunisia had also been affected by the trend towards the Islamisation of society that has spread throughout the Arab world over the preceding few decades.

During the early days of the transition process in 2011, as elsewhere in the Arab world, both the Islamists and the modernists were concerned that the respective other camp would impose its specific political and social model on the country. Once *Ennahda* had become the strongest single party in the first free elections and dominated the ensuing so-called *troika* coalition government, the idea that “it’s (finally) our turn” initially drove the leading party’s conduct. Consequently, key positions in administration and the security apparatus were filled with supporters, and party members (including the victims of the Ben Ali regime) were suitably looked after. *Ennahda* gave free rein to the nefarious activities of radical Islamist groups, at least during its first year in government, and it advocated stronger references to Islam and Islamic law in the constitutional process.⁵

In view of this dynamic – catalysed by the murder of two left-wing opposition politicians in February and June 2013 – the modernist camp mobilised. Mass demonstrations and the influence of the media as well as intellectuals mainly critical of the government helped the predominantly secular civil society to win back opinion leadership. In the meantime, Essebsi succeeded in establishing a political alternative to *Ennahda* with the *Nidaa Tounes* party, which he had founded in June 2012. This party attracted proponents of a secular state from a variety of backgrounds – from trade union representatives and human rights activists to liberal-minded entrepreneurs and supporters of the old regime.

In the summer of 2013, the two camps in Tunisia were in opposition to each other on greater ideological differences than ever before. The international context was changing at the same time. On 3 July of that year, with broad popular support, the military assumed power in Cairo and ousted the Muslim Brothers, who had won in free elections the previous year. The ascent of political Islam in the course of the “Arab Spring” appeared to have come to an end. There was also an air of expectancy of a potential coup in Tunis. But the domestic balance of power between Islamists and modernists that had been achieved by then along with the disquieting scenario in Egypt, where violence was escalating, and international pressure on Tunisia, depending on financial aid, resulted in both sides ultimately realising that they needed to come to a consensus. The Tunisian actors were able to pick up on a tradition of cooperation and dialogue that the modernist and Islamist members of the opposition in the Ben-Ali-era had developed.⁶

Against this background, civil society organisations led by the (traditionally rather secular) trades union *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT) succeeded in bringing the political parties together within a “National Dialogue”, thereby restarting the work in the National Constituent Assembly, which had been blocked until then. At the same time, the country’s two most important politicians, who had already

developed into the generally acknowledged leaders of the modernist and Islamist camps, came to an agreement. On 14 August 2013, Essebsi and the *Ennahda* president Rached Ghannouchi met in France. The “National Dialogue” and the “Paris handshake” marked the turning point in the Tunisian transition and prevented a violent confrontation between modernists and Islamists. A threefold compromise approach was agreed and subsequently implemented successfully: the appointment of a technocratic transitional government, the completion of the constitutional process, and the preparation of general presidential and parliamentary elections.

The political cooperation of Islamists and modernists is controversial in both camps.

The following election campaign, however, once again featured the modernist-Islamist polarity. Under the slogan *vote utile* (useful vote), Essebsi and *Nidaa Tounes* warned against renewed splintering and defeat by the Islamists. They ultimately managed to unite the modernist camp under their banner and were able to gain a clear victory both in the parliamentary and the presidential elections. The party received close to 37 per cent of the votes, thereby winning 86 of the 217 seats in parliament; in the second round, Essebsi beat the incumbent Marzouki (44 per cent and 1.4 million votes) with 56 per cent (1.7 million votes). While theoretically a majority would have been possible against *Ennahda*, becoming the second-strongest force in parliament with some 28 per cent (69 seats), Essebsi opted for a grand coalition with the Islamists.

In his opinion, that was the only way to guarantee a stable government and to prevent *Ennahda* distinguishing itself as an opposition party and potential alternative government. Essebsi intended to make the Islamists share in the responsibility for the difficult tasks ahead instead of them using their power to mobilise

forces against a government dominated by modernists and technocrats. Ghannouchi, for his part, wanted to embed his party in the mainstream by government involvement and prevent the state apparatus from being used against it (as had happened under the old regime in Tunisia and was happening again in Egypt to the Muslim Brotherhood). He also believed this was a way to avoid political and social isolation of *Ennahda*, as had happened especially in 2013. The celebrated appearance given to President Essebsi at *Ennahda's* party conference in May 2016, where the party distanced itself (at least on the face of it) from its fundamental Islamist rhetoric, was a clear illustration of this new era of modernist-Islamist cooperation at the highest level. Nonetheless, this approach does by far not enjoy unanimous support in the two camps, and the question as to “How much Islam?” has still not been resolved in politics and society and has therefore the potential of being remobilised in the political sphere. With the current restructuring of the party landscape and in view of the upcoming local elections, this contentious issue might intensify again.

Persistent Divides: Between Centre and Periphery, between Elites and Citizens

The double compromise between revolution and continuity as well as between modernists and Islamists was probably necessary, but is by no means a sufficient prerequisite for the consolidation of the Tunisian democracy. This compromise, which was first and foremost a compromise between elites with a limited scope of impact, left some social divides ignored and possibly even contributed to their worsening. This applies particularly to the conflict lines between the centre and the periphery and between the governing elites and the population at large.

The inequalities in power and prosperity as well as the cultural and identity-related differences between the north-eastern coastal region (the Tunisian Sahel) on the one hand and the inland regions in the northwest, the centre and (parts of) the south of the country on the other

have been a characteristic element of Tunisia's development for decades. Average unemployment inland is twice as high as on the coast. 85 per cent of Tunisian economic output is generated in the three largest cities of Tunis, Sousse and Sfax. There is an imbalance in the standard of infrastructure in practically all areas – from healthcare to education. Examples of this include the maternal death rate, for instance, (three times as high in the town of Kasserine in the northwest than in Tunis), illiteracy (32 per cent in Kasserine, twelve per cent in Tunis) and the proportion of households connected to the water system. While the latter is as high as 90 per cent in Tunis, it is less than a third in Kasserine.⁷ This divide goes back to the time of the French protectorate, which recruited its administrative staff from the coastal cities, and has been perpetuated through economic and structural policies since independence (such as measures to promote mass beach tourism and focus manufacturing on exports). The rural exodus to the coastal cities, which began with the failed socialist agricultural experiments in the 1960s, resulted in suburbs springing up, frequently in an uncontrolled fashion, which must still be considered part of the periphery due to their socioeconomic and cultural characteristics. It was in the neglected central region of Tunisia that the revolution was then sparked on 17 December 2010 and where most of the bloodshed took place.

Over the last decades, the government repeatedly launched large-scale projects and the overall poverty level declined. But the inland regions still lag far behind in terms of structural development – even though six years have passed since the revolution. The economic and political inclusion of the protesting youth both from the hinterland and the sprawling suburbs of the larger cities has failed to materialise so far. Only half of Tunisians voted in the first free elections in the country's history on 23 October 2011. Remarkably, the non-voters included many young people and inhabitants of the regions where the revolutionary movement was especially strong.⁸

The second disconnect is between the elite and the wider population. While there was some broadening of the governing stratum during the transition phase thanks to the integration of the (moderate) Islamist spectrum as well as cooperation between democratic forces and actors from the *ancien régime* willing to reform, large swathes of the population, whose high expectations of democracy had been disappointed, turned away from politics and particularly the political parties. The public spirit and the feeling of national unity that many Tunisians still talk about with their eyes lit up did not survive past the transition phase. Voter turnout, which dropped further to under 40 per cent in 2014 (only one in five young voters went to the polling station), is only one symptom. Similar to the situation in the entire North Africa/Middle East region, the trust rating for political institutions in Tunisia is below ten per cent (contrary to the army, the family or local religious authorities, which are trusted by some 80 per cent of citizens).⁹

Tunisian civil society has flourished since the revolution; the number of clubs and associations has doubled to 20,000. While the initial euphoria has died down, civil society is still an important actor (particularly in its “watchdog” function) and provides opportunities for committed Tunisians to engage beyond the political parties. However, even here it is the established groups that are more successful in making themselves heard as they can fall back on some structures from before 2011 and have appropriate funds and connections. The “mobilizations from the margins”¹⁰, involving victim support groups representing those who lost family members or were injured in the revolution and frequently come from the lower classes and neglected regions, are hardly visible in public discourse. Due to structural deficiencies as well as a lack of awareness in the inland regions, social engagement (with all the positive consequences it entails for the individual and collectively) threatens to become a privilege of urban young people from the middle and upper classes cementing social divides further.

Three main reasons can be cited for the disconnect between the elite and the citizens or for the widespread political apathy. Firstly, the economic situation has not improved for the majority of Tunisians since the revolution; the economic “democracy dividend” did not materialise. Even though the structural causes of the economic crisis stem from the time before the revolution or are not directly linked to the democratisation process, such as the terror attacks of 2015, the “transformation patience” of many Tunisians has been exhausted. Because of price rises, particularly for food, and other everyday problems, people are predominantly concerned with making ends meet. Secondly, the “party culture” is still underdeveloped. With some 200 registered parties, the political landscape is not only splintered (particularly in the modernist camp), but also still far removed from engendering a truly democratic (party) political awareness. Large swathes of the elites and ordinary citizens do not understand parties as being the vehicles to transmit the interests of (part of) the public or ideas about society as a whole but rather as means for personal advancement. Perpetual internal crises and hard-fought power struggles played out in public, especially in the governing parties, further discredit political engagement.

Thirdly, the compromises described above, although to be welcomed in principle, have eliminated two moving causes that mobilised the young before: fighting for a new start in line with the revolution’s goals in 2010/2011 and later on, from 2012 to 2014, fighting against threatening Islamisation through an overpowering *Ennahda*. To date, efforts to channel the energy of young Tunisians into sustained engagement for the institutions of democracy have failed. Instead, competences and responsibilities have become even less clear with the coalition and unity governments as well as the dominant roles played by Essebsi (whose domestic competences as president should, in fact, be limited according to the constitution) and by Ghannouchi (who does not even hold a government post officially). Institutional processes, such as the interplay between legislature and executive, become

established only at a slow pace as the most important decisions are taken informally. Protest and even constructive engagement of citizens have thus difficulties of finding a clear target. There is also no effective opposition within the system any longer. This in turn leaves a vacuum to be filled by radical groups, such as Salafists and Jihadists, and drives people who are dissatisfied with the status quo into their arms.

“The Revolution has revealed the deep rift between the political, social and economic elites and the marginalised masses of traditional society, who triggered the revolutionary process,” the Tunisian historian Mustapha Kraiem commented in 2014. The latter would no longer accept this marginalisation, and as the political parties were “not embedded in society”, the rift between the governing and the governed would keep widening.¹¹ While one needs to consider these types of process over decades rather than years, it does seem painful that this assessment still holds true after three more years of transformation – and notwithstanding the comprehensive international support for Tunisia. The two overlapping divides or cleavages center-periphery and elite-population are reinforcing each other. Not only does this harbour a risk to the consolidation of Tunisian democracy, it also jeopardises the country’s stability in general.¹²

Conclusion: Tunisia as the Exception?

What conclusions can be drawn from the developments in Tunisia for the complex transformation of the Arab world, which has had an overall destabilising impact to date? One must bear in mind that the internal and geopolitical conditions for peaceful democratisation were specific in Tunisia and better than elsewhere in the Arab world from the outset: these ranged from a relatively high educational level to a religiously and ethnically mostly homogenous population to economic links with Europe and a traditionally high level of openness. Consequently, the small north-African country cannot serve as a blueprint for democratisation. Nonetheless it does remain a “beacon of hope”, as Angela Merkel declared during her visit to the Tunisian



Looking ahead into the future: Tunisia's destiny is not least going to depend on whether it manages to translate the energy of the Tunisian youth into engagement for the country's institutions of democracy. Source: © Anis Mili, Reuters.

parliament in March 2017. Tunisia has embarked on a path that can offer greater political and economic participation to its citizens. It has shown that the deep divides in Arab societies can be addressed by peaceful negotiation and that new power constellations can be worked out in dialogue with each other – however laborious and lengthy this journey may be.

There are some prerequisites for a successful “moderation” of such lines of conflict – the example of Tunisia suggests this at least. These include not only willingness and some good sense on the part of the key actors but also a domestic balance of power that allows room for this good sense to develop. International pressure can make a contribution here, particularly in those countries that rely on economic or security cooperation with the West. But it is even more important to foster the appropriate political culture among the elites and in society as a

whole. While external interference that comes across as too aggressive and intransigent can be counterproductive – particularly if it comes from the West that has been discredited in terms of its morality and is easily accused of imperialist intentions – international actors working closely with local partners definitely have the capability of helping to establish suitable forms of dialogue and cooperation mechanisms as well as furthering appropriate training programmes.

But they must not stop halfway with their efforts. Development cooperation and the promotion of democracy always harbour the risk of cementing existing power structures and thereby keeping social divides open. At the local level, international organisations are frequently and inevitably more likely to work with those who are closest to them in terms of socio-cultural background, who “speak the same language”. The same accounts for Tunisia, where large

numbers of new foreign actors, not necessarily familiar with the country, arrived on the scene after 2011; also here, one can see how sought-after those local partners are, who already have certain management skills or an international profile, while other groups and strata of society remain inaccessible. This situation requires greater creativity in finding new ways of accompanying and supporting individuals and groups as well as a greater political courage to remind the dominant elites of these countries of their responsibility to the whole of society. That poses new challenges for the German and European foreign policy in the region, which must become even more differentiated and must engage more “in-depth” with the Arab societies.

The so-called authoritarian bargain is becoming obsolete as a political model in the Arab world.

As open as the outcome of the Arab transformation may be: The deadly silence of former times, when too many international actors believed they could rely on “strong men” to sort things out, will not return, at least not in the medium and long term. The so-called authoritarian bargain – the absolute ruler guarantees security and prosperity, and citizens give up their civil liberties in return – is a political model that is becoming obsolete in the Arab world; also due to some fundamental developments in these states, such as demographic change and structural economic difficulties.¹³ Resource-poor countries can simply no longer afford it and even oil-rich states such as Saudi Arabia now see themselves forced to diversify their economy. But the farewell from the rentier state model will hardly be mastered without allowing greater freedoms to the citizens. While the generation of the states’ founding fathers were still able to justify their claim to power “historically”, the basis of legitimisation of the incumbent regimes, which are incapable of providing decent prospects for their populations, is crumbling. The currently escalating

inter-state and sectarian tensions in the region may have a stabilising effect on some ruling structures – with the appropriate propaganda. But in the long term, this will not keep the youth at rest, who is increasingly networked and striving for individual opportunities in life; already today they account for the majority of the population in Arab countries.

These structural dynamics, which were already fuelling the protests and upheavals during the “Arab Spring” in 2010/2011, still prevail. In parallel with the current geopolitical restructuring of the Arab world, the national social contracts will therefore also have to be renegotiated. These “processes of negotiation” harbour a potential for further violence and destabilisation; but they also offer the prospect of forming more inclusive (and therefore more sustainable) models of government and development. The course and outcome of the complex transformation in the Arab world will also depend on whether the divisions between Islamists and modernists, or the centre and the periphery as well as between the generations or between denominations and ethnic groups, can be tackled in a peaceful manner. Each country has to also find its appropriate and specific balance between continuity and change.

It is not and never has been a law of nature that the collapse of old-established patterns, such as the “Arab Spring” set off, must end in violent chaos or autocratic restoration. Tunisia is still testament to that today. And maybe it is a good thing that the country’s schoolchildren call this to mind every day when they sing the national anthem, which includes verses by the Tunisian poet Aboul Kacem Chebbi: “When the people will to live / Destiny must surely respond / Oppression shall then vanish / Fetters are certain to break.”

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- 1 On the genesis and role of the commission, see Ben Achour, Yadh 2016: Tunisie. Une révolution en pays d'islam, Tunis, pp. 274-279.
- 2 Krizen, Aziz 2016: La promesse du printemps, Tunis, pp. 126-127. Here and in the following text, translation into English based on the author's translation from French into English.
- 3 Cf. Ben Achour, n. 1, pp. 351-352.
- 4 In this article, the terms are used as analytical categories, and not to ascribe values. At the same time, they are also used as political battle cries, whether in political practice in Tunisia or in the academic discourse. They are or were frequently used by the respective actors to describe themselves. Ever since its party conference in May 2016, *Ennahda* distanced itself from the term Islamism, now preferring the term "Islamic democrats" or "Muslim democrats" instead. Members of the modernist camp also like to use the attributes "democratic", "republican" and "progressive" (*progressiste*) to describe and distinguish themselves from the Islamists. The term "secular", on the other hand, is used mainly by international observers.
- 5 Cf. Faath, Sigrid / Mattes, Hanspeter 2014: Hindernisse bei der Bekämpfung islamistischer Gewalt in Tunesien, Wuqûf-Kurzanalyse No. 24, Berlin; Kraiem, Mustapha 2014: La révolution kidnappée, Tunis, pp. 339-520.
- 6 First and foremost, the meeting of members of the secular left has to be mentioned, which included the two subsequent governing parties CPR and *Ettakatol*, and the Islamists, which took place in the French town of Aix-en-Provence in May 2003 and resulted in the "Appel de Tunis du 17 juin 2003", which called for democratic reforms. On 18 October 2005, several leading opposition figures began a 32-day hunger strike, a supporting committee consisted of regime critics from every political quarter. In addition, left-wing (or modernist) lawyers such as the politician Chokri Belaid, who was murdered by radical Islamists in 2013, regularly provided legal aid to *Ennahda*-followers persecuted by the Ben Ali regime.
- 7 Cf. Mestiri, Mhamed 2016: Disparités regionales. Etat des lieux d'une discrimination, Nawaat, in: <http://bit.ly/2rDEKX3> [5 Mar 2017]; Sbouai Sana 2015: Kasserine se constitue région victime, Inkyfada, in: <http://bit.ly/2qzZMBH> [5 Mar 2017].
- 8 Cf. Gana, Alia / Van Hamme, Gilles / Ben Rebah, Maher 2012: Géographie électorale et disparités socio-territoriales: les enseignements des élections pour l'assemblée constituante en Tunisie, in: *l'espace politique* No. 18.
- 9 Cf. The World Bank 2014: Tunisia. Breaking the Barriers to Youth Inclusion, Washington D.C., p. 11 (2012 figures). In a survey among young Tunisians conducted by *Sigma Conseil* in November 2016, 82 per cent agreed with the statement that "the responsible politicians are not sufficiently interested in the concerns of our generation" and only three per cent felt represented by political parties. Cf. *Sigma Conseil/Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung* 2016: Être jeune en Tunisie aujourd'hui et demain, Tunis.
- 10 Antonakis-Nashif, Anna 2016: Contested transformation: mobilized publics in Tunisia between compliance and protest, in: *Mediterranean Politics* 21/1, pp. 128-149.
- 11 Kraiem, n. 5, p. 523.
- 12 The "multi-dimensional marginalisation" (economic, social, political, civic, geographic and cultural) of some strata of the population also provides a breeding ground for Islamist radicalisation in Tunisia and explains the high number of Tunisian foreign terrorist fighters. Cf. Ratka, Edmund/Roux, Marie-Christine 2016: Jihad instead of Democracy? Tunisia's Marginalised Youth and Islamist Terrorism, in: *International Reports* 1/2016, pp. 64-82, <http://kas.de/wf/en/33.44290> [31 May 2017].
- 13 Cf. also Klingholz, Reiner / Müller, Ruth 2016: When Education Turns into a Problem. The Impact of Demographic Factors on Political Stability in the Middle East and North Africa: *International Reports* 4/2016, pp. 14-27, <http://kas.de/wf/en/33.47596> [31 May 2017].