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TUNISIA – A REVOLUTION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Thomas Schiller

Tunisia has always been seen as a model Arab country. It was, indeed, a police state but it had also enjoyed some impressive successes including an outstanding economic and social record compared to the rest of the region, an active policy of promoting equality between men and women since independence and a well-educated population. Millions of tourists from Europe and the Arab world flocked to Tunisia to enjoy its famed hospitality. Even the systematic repression of Islamist groups was generally viewed positively by the international community as being a sign of the country's pro-western orientation. Despite criticisms many observers still viewed Tunisia in a generally positive light. The regime's self-promoted image as a stabilising factor within the region was often accepted without objections. The real truth behind this facade – repression and corruption – was mostly only talked about by experts and journalists. So it is no surprise that today many Tunisians accuse the West of having turned a blind eye to the true character of the regime for too long and of having tolerated its authoritarian nature for purely selfish reasons, namely the fight against Islamist extremism and stopping the flow of illegal migrants. Even Tunisia's economic and social successes are being reassessed following the recent upheavals, and even well-off Tunisians are now angrily claiming that they were not aware of the level of poverty in their country, especially in the interior land.

The Ben Ali regime with its well-oiled surveillance apparatus appeared to be both secure and well-protected. This is why it is all the more surprising that unrest in

the interior of the country following Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation should lead to Ben Ali's regime collapsing within the space of just four weeks. The fall of Ben Ali and the associated political upheavals in Tunisia resulted in this small country sparking a wave of protests against authoritarian regimes throughout the Arab world, the implications of which are still unknown. The Tunisian revolution showed that regimes that appeared to be strong and stable in fact had very shallow roots.

TUNISIA: TWO PRESIDENTS IN 52 YEARS

The regime of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali appeared to be very secure, and political stability seemed to be a characteristic of the country. Since independence in 1956 and the subsequent founding of the Republic, Tunisia had only had two presidents: Habib Bourguiba (1959 to 1987) and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987 to 2011).

The influence of Habib Bourguiba, founding president of the Tunisian Republic after 1959, can still be felt in Tunisia today. It was he who created the Republic in 1957, a year after the country's independence, and brought to an end the Bey monarchy that went all the way back to the Ottoman Empire. As the leader of the Neo Destour Party, he dominated the political landscape for decades. Bourguiba set the country on a course of modernisation from the very beginning, including a far-reaching policy of gender equality and an ambitious education programme. His politics were decidedly secular in nature in spite of the occasional compromise with Islamist groups. For many Tunisians today Bourguiba is still considered one of the great men of the country, a kind of father-figure for the nation. However, even early on, Bourguiba's regime was moving towards authoritarianism. He alone made all the key political decisions. True democracy was never really on the agenda. In 1975 he became President for life. Tunisia's political system started to fossilize and the economy went into crisis. The 1980s in Tunisia were all about Bourguiba's poor state of health, widespread cronyism and corruption and continuing unrest that was brutally suppressed.

Habib Bourguiba dominated the political landscape for decades. For many Tunisians he is still considered a kind of father-figure for the nation.

The deposing of Habib Bourguiba by his Prime Minister Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on November 7, 1987 was therefore welcomed by most Tunisians. Ben Ali had a panel of physicians declare that Bourguiba was unfit for office. This bloodless coup, which went down in the history books as a “medical coup”, seemed to be the dawning of a new era for Tunisia. And indeed, initial statements from Ben Ali and his entourage seemed to offer some hope. There was to be more political openness, reforms would be carried out in politics, the economy and society in general and political prisoners would be released. Another thing that encouraged the people at this time was the fact that the stability of the country had at no point been compromised during the takeover of power.¹

The policy of openness was short-lived. Ben Ali’s tough crackdown on the Islamist opposition was accompanied by a significant expansion of the security forces. However, after the euphoria of the first few months disillusionment soon set in. The policy of openness was short-lived. While Ben Ali’s tough crackdown on the Islamist

opposition was supported in the following years by many middle and upper-class Tunisians, the crackdown was accompanied by a significant expansion of the security forces. Every type of political opposition was in fact repressed in the following years and the media underwent tight controls. Ben Ali basically created a police state in Tunisia that was unparalleled amongst the other states in the region. He was re-elected with never less than 89 per cent of the vote² in 1989, 1994, 1999, 2004 and 2009. The “November 7th Change” that was celebrated in nearly every public statement had in fact led to an even more repressive regime than that of the Bourguiba era.

(BEN) ALI BABA AND THE 40 THIEVES³: FROM MODEL COUNTRY TO KLEPTOCRACY

Police expert Ben Ali had created the perfect police state. From humble beginnings, he had begun in the Tunisian Republic’s new army after the country’s independence.

1 | On Ben Ali’s takeover of power cf. i.a. Nicolas Beau and Jean-Pierre Tuquoi, *Notre ami Ben Ali*, Paris, 1999 (NE 2011), 43-61.

2 | This was Ben Ali’s “worst” result in 2009.

3 | This play on the story title from the 1001 Nights was a favourite expression in the internet to describe the plundering of Tunisia and its economy by the President and his corrupt entourage.

After studying at military academies in France and the USA he held various positions within the country's security services, interspersed with foreign postings in Morocco and Poland. Ben Ali was head of Military Security, head of National Security, Interior Minister and finally Prime Minister. Born to humble parents in the coastal town of Sousse, he was always considered to be something of a parvenu by the country's bourgeoisie. Many jokes amongst Tunisians were explicitly aimed at the General's lack of university education, of which "President Bac minus 3"⁴ was one of the milder ones.⁵

Nevertheless Tunisia under Ben Ali also seemed to be making progress on the economic and social fronts. It was able to establish itself as a popular tourist destination, with the Island of Djerba and Tunisian coastal resorts such as Hammamet and Sousse proving to be popular destinations for visitors from Europe and the Arab world. Foreign investors were able to take advantage of the high standard of education amongst Tunisian workers, active support from the state and low labour costs. Ben Ali himself, a self-confessed IT fan, was keen to expand (and control) internet access within the country. He retained Bourguiba's secular policies and the country's gender equality was acclaimed around the world as a success for Tunisian politics. Many international observers expressed their admiration, and Tunisia always had an excellent ranking in the statistics issued by international organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).⁶ When talking about Tunisia, people tended to forget the authoritarian nature of the regime, the constant repression of any opposition and the raging

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4 | In Tunisia, as in France, any year spent at university is added on to the high school diploma (Baccalaureat), i.e. someone who successfully completes a five-year Masters or degree course can show their educational qualifications as "Bac plus 5".

5 | For Ben Ali's career cf. Beau and Tuquoi, n. 1, 21-42.

6 | Cf. i.a. the comparative analysis in Thomas Schiller and Jerome Kuchejda, "20 Jahre Arabische Maghreb Union," *KAS Länderbericht*, June 19, 2009, in: <http://kas.de/maghreb/de/publications/16850>, as well as Tunisia's constant high rankings in the Human Development Reports of UNDP: Tunisia Country Profile, *Human Development Report 2011*, <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/TUN.html> (accessed April 8, 2011).

nepotism.⁷ Tunisia was considered a pro-western, secular, economically and socially successful role model for North Africa.

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However, in recent years cracks had started to appear in the regime's well-maintained facade. The country was starting to stagnate economically and the job market in particular was unable to cope with the high number of young graduates leaving university each year. Youth unemployment and lack of prospects for young Tunisians was becoming a growing problem.⁸ Many observers estimated that youth unemployment was at least 30 per cent. Those young people who did find jobs were often only able to find casual work or badly-paid jobs that required little in the way of qualifications. At the same time the middle classes were coming under more pressure, with personal debts and rising prices weighing heavily on many families. The implied "deal" that the regime had with the people – an authoritarian political system in exchange for economic and social progress – was no longer working. In 2008 there were protests in the traditionally rebellious mining town of Gafsa in the south west of the country, when the management of the local phosphate mine were accused of corruption and nepotism when planning new appointments.⁹

In parallel to this development, corruption and nepotism were becoming more obvious in presidential circles. Members of the family of Ben Ali's wife, Leila Trabelsi, were blatantly lining their own pockets. The Trabelsi family led

7 | One critical voice was the French daily newspaper *Le Monde*, whose reporter Florence Beaugé was heavily criticized by the regime and finally expelled from the country in the run-up to the Presidential elections in 2009. Beaugé's articles on Tunisia have been compiled into a book: Florence Beaugé, *La Tunisie de Ben Ali, Miracle ou mirage?*, Paris, 2010.

8 | In the whole of the Maghreb graduate unemployment is proving to be a major problem. In Morocco the "diplômés chômeurs" have become a well-organized association which demonstrates regularly in the capital, Rabat. In Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia the high rate of youth unemployment not only shows the inability of the labour market to absorb new graduates but unfortunately it is also a sign of the inadequate training for working life which is often provided by a rigid and antiquated educational system.

9 | More than 1,000 candidates applied for 81 positions. Cf. i.a. Beaugé, n. 7, 81 et sqq.

by brother Belhassen, nephew Imed and son-in-law Sakhr el Materi were in direct or indirect control of large swathes of the Tunisian economy and had no qualms about open criminal activity. There was an international furore about the theft of a yacht belonging to a well-known French banker from a harbour on Corsica when it later turned out that this was carried out upon the orders of Imed Trabelsi, Leila's nephew.¹⁰

The Trabelsi family's greed is also the reason why Tunisia is one of the few countries in the world where the U.S. fast-food chain McDonald's is not represented. It was made clear to the company that only the "Family" could hold the franchise, which was unacceptable to the Americans. The family's influence and power was so strong that many Tunisians feared, in view of Ben Ali's advancing years, that Leila Trabelsi herself or one of her puppets would try to gain the presidency. Tunisia was in danger of becoming a mafia-run family business.

THE TUNISIAN REVOLUTION

The Tunisian revolution began on December 17, 2010. Deep in the neglected interior of the country, in the town of Sidi Bouzid, well away from the eyes of political observers and the world's media, a fruit and vegetable vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire. He felt driven to commit this tragic act by the humiliations he had suffered at the hands of the local authorities and by his sense of hopelessness about the future. Bouazizi died in hospital of his injuries on January 4, 2011. But who would have imagined that this one act would trigger such a wave of protests against the Ben Ali regime?¹¹

The Tunisian revolution began deep in the neglected interior of the country, in the town of Sidi Bouzid. A fruit and vegetable vendor set himself on fire.

10 | Details about the family's intrigues can be found in the now famous book by journalists Beau and Graciet. It goes without saying that this book was banned in Tunisia but it was hotly-debated in the streets and restaurants of Tunis. It told the Tunisians that word on the activities of the Trabelsi family had reached Europe and detailed almost inconceivable stories about the greed of the President's wife's clan. Beau and Graciet also looked at the reliability of the figures proving the Tunisian "economic miracle". Nicolas Beau and Catherine Graciet, *La régente de Carthage. Main basse sur la Tunisie*, Paris, 2009.

11 | Portraits of Mohamed Bouazizi can be found i.a. in *Jeune Afrique*, No. 2615, February 20-26, 2011, 40 et sqq., and *Der Spiegel*, 11/2011, March 14, 2011.

In the wake of this self-immolation, towns in the country's interior such as Sidi Bouzid, Thala and Kasserine were the scene of spontaneous protests by mainly young Tunisians.

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After just a few days it was clear that this unrest was not just about social issues. The lack of prospects for young Tunisians was certainly the main reason for the protests, but resentment soon spilled over against the regime, and particularly against the corrupt family of the president's wife Leila. Once the protests reached the more prosperous coastal regions and the capital Tunis, the slogans became even more pointed: "Ben Ali degage" (Get out Ben Ali), "Freedom" and "Democracy". Large sections of the UGTT trade union voiced their support for the demonstrators' demands for reform and called for strike. There was also support from other bodies such as the Tunisian Bar Association, and the people's movement gained new supporters every day. Tunisians from all levels of society and all parts of the country poured onto the streets, organising themselves through internet, mobile phone and verbal communication.

The security forces immediately reacted with brutality to the first demonstrations in the country's heartlands. They tried to break up the demonstrators in order to nip the protests in the bud. They had no qualms about firing on the people – by latest counts more than 200 people died during the main four weeks of demonstrations in December and January and more than 500 were injured, some seriously. But the people were not intimidated by the police violence. On the contrary anti-regime sentiment became even stronger, despite the curfew which was imposed on the Tunis region on January 12, 2011.

In three televised addresses, Ben Ali tried to calm the situation down. He offered more concessions every time he appeared. In his first address on December 28, 2010 he was still trying to show his strength and sharply criticised the protests. He visited Mohamed Bouazizi in hospital, hoping this gesture would demonstrate his sympathy and understanding. In his second address on January 10, 2011 Ben Ali was much more conciliatory, as the protests had by then reached the coastal provinces and the country's capital. He tried to show his willingness to

make concessions by announcing the creation of 300,000 new jobs. The third televised address on the evening of January 13, 2011 was a last desperate attempt on the part of Ben Ali to take the sting out of the protests. He spoke in Tunisian dialect rather than his usual classical Arabic. He promised not to change the constitution which limited the age of presidential candidates to 75, in this way indirectly announcing that he would not be standing for president in 2014. He also instructed the police that they should not use violence against peaceful demonstrators, promising the people of Tunisia "no more violence". He even promised to lift internet restrictions. But it was clear already on the evening of this speech that these concessions would not be enough.

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The demonstration on January 14 on the central Avenue Habib Bourguiba, right in front of the Interior Ministry, was a clear sign that the people were demanding that Ben Ali step down immediately and that they were neither satisfied nor intimidated by the president's words.¹² Several thousand demonstrators from all levels of Tunisian society poured onto this magnificent avenue in the centre of the capital. Their demands were clear: the departure of Ben Ali and a total change in the political system. In the early afternoon the police used violence to break up this peaceful protest – despite Ben Ali's declaration to the contrary. The battle between protesters and security forces continued throughout Tunis right into the night, with occasional gunfire being heard.

By 4.00 p.m. Ben Ali had already flown out of Tunis heading for Saudi Arabia. As the news spread – first a rumour, then officially confirmed in a TV address by Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi – there was no celebrating on the streets. The situation was still precarious and the whole weekend was marked by skirmishes between the Tunisian armed forces and armed agitators who were thought to be part of Ben Ali's camp. There was looting and burning, with the Trabelsi family residences being particularly in the firing

12 | The author was able to directly follow the events of the Tunisian revolution in the centre of the capital Tunis. Cf. *KAS Länderberichte* on Tunisia at <http://kas.de/tunesien/de/publications/serials/7> (accessed April 19, 2011).

line. In many areas militias were formed to prevent attacks on houses and shops. The army protected the main institutions and buildings, and their attempts to restore order made them the only trustworthy institution in the people's eyes. The situation after the departure of the president still remained uncertain, with Tunisia finding itself in a power vacuum. No-one knew who was now pulling the strings.

The exact circumstances of Ben Ali's departure are still unknown. Different scenarios have been suggested and the president's flight is surrounded by rumour. Many questions are only likely to be answered with the passage of time. It is still unclear what role was played by individual members of the security apparatus such as the hated head of the Presidential Guard Ali Seriati or the army Chief of Staff General Rachid Ammar, hailed as a hero by many Tunisians.¹³

FROM ONE TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT TO THE NEXT

On the evening of January 14, 2011, the day that President Ben Ali fled the country, his long-serving Prime Minister, Mohamed Ghannouchi, announced in a television address that he was taking over the official duties as president in line with article 56 of the constitution that allows the Prime Minister to do so in case of the President's incapacity for office. A state of emergency had been imposed one hour earlier. However, on Saturday, January 15, 2011, President of the Chamber of Deputies

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Fouad Mebaaza was appointed as interim president by the Constitutional Council, this time based on article 57 of the constitution. This made one small but crucial difference: appointing Mebaaza as interim president meant that Ben Ali would never return.

13 | The weekly magazine *Jeune Afrique* describes these decisive moments, cf. *Jeune Afrique*, No. 2615, February 20-26, 2011, 12 et sqq. Another account is given by former defence minister Ridha Grira in an interview with the Tunisian *Radio Mosaïque* at the beginning of March, in which he played down the role of the army chief of staff, General Ammar, and also disputed the fact that the army had ignored Ben Ali's orders to fire, saying such an order had never been given. Grira also showed the role of Seriati in a different light. He paints a picture of total breakdown and chaos within the power apparatus.

On January 16 Mohamed Ghannouchi formed an initial transitional government. However, the key ministries of Interior, Defence and Foreign Affairs were still populated by the old ministers from Ben Ali's "Constitutional Democratic Rally" party (RCD). The government also included representatives of the opposition and civil society such as lawyer and opposition politician Nejib Chebbi and the president of the *Institut Arabe des Droits de l'homme*, Taieb Baccouche. After just a few days it was clear that many Tunisians were not at all happy with this outcome as there was not a sufficiently clear break with the old system and particularly the ruling RCD. On January 27 Ghannouchi reshuffled the government, resulting in the departure of the RCD representatives and the appointment of new ministers. Ghannouchi was the only remaining representative of the old guard. But this solution also proved to be of limited effect. The transitional government's lack of communication, particularly about how change would be brought about, left many Tunisians feeling disaffected. More protests broke out in the centre of Tunis, mainly in front of the Prime Minister's offices. It was becoming increasingly clear that change could not be pushed through based on the old constitution. The constitution stated that new presidential elections had to take place no more than 60 days after the departure of the old president. All parties deemed this unrealistic, but had no clear alternative to offer.

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On February 27 a new transitional government was formed under a new prime minister, 84-year-old Beji Caid Essebsi.¹⁴ Once again a stream of ministers left the government. Essebsi was respected by the people for his independence, his direct manner, his desire to communicate and his past career. The political situation was further stabilised by interim president Mebaaza's announcement on March 3

14 | Beji Caid Essebsi was born in 1926 to an old-established family within Tunis' bourgeoisie. He studied law in Paris, was an adviser to Habib Bourguiba, and later became Minister of the Interior. He left his last official position as President of the Chamber of Deputies in 1991. There is a certain irony in the fact that Essebsi was involved in setting up the first Constitutional Assembly after Tunisia's independence in 1956. A portrait of Essebsi can be found in *Jeune Afrique*, No. 2617, March 6-12, 2011, 47 et sqq.

that elections would be held for a Constitutional Assembly on July 24, 2011. This announcement was in line with the desire of most Tunisians to see a clear break with the old system and it rendered the old constitution ineffective. An independent commission led by prominent lawyer Yadh Ben Achour now has the task of preparing for these elections.

But many Tunisians are now asking themselves what actually happened in the weeks surrounding Ben Ali's departure. Was it really a revolution? The answer has to be "yes", even though the people in charge initially tried to manage the changes after Ben Ali's departure on January 14 within the framework of the existing constitution. But it was the announcement that a Constitutional Assembly would be set up to draft a new constitution that marked the real revolutionary break with the old order.

TUNISIA TODAY: A MULTITUDE OF CHALLENGES

With hindsight and in the context of the bloody conflicts in Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria, two characteristics of the Tunisian revolution should be stressed. Firstly, Tunisia has up to now been the only country in the region where the revolution had a chance of bringing about real change. And this change took place in less than four weeks, between December 17 and January 14. Even though it cost dozens of lives, there was no bloodbath. Tunisia now has the opportunity to start a whole new chapter of its history. It is the only country in the region which is going to elect a Constitutional Assembly after the fall of its previous ruler and thus leave behind the era of this authoritarian presidential regime. In light of the country's experiences since independence, many voices are being raised in Tunisia calling for a parliamentary republic or at the very least a move away from a purely presidential system.¹⁵ So what are the main challenges which the new Tunisia is now facing?

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¹⁵ | Cf. survey by Global Management Service, a Tunisian consultancy company, in: <http://gmstunisie.com/site/non-classe/resultats-du-sondage-politique> (accessed April 2, 2011). The survey also included questions on parties and politicians.

The first thing is to re-establish and secure the country's stability. A true democratic transition process requires political and, above all, economic stability. Preparing for the elections and subsequent debate on a new constitution would be made very difficult if the country were in political and economic chaos. And the new Tunisia cannot allow itself to gamble with its economic future. One of the biggest problems for Tunisia's transformation is the huge weight of expectation from so many people. Most people in Tunisia are also keen not to miss out on the economic front.¹⁶ Many of them are well-aware of how crucial it is to re-establish stability and are critical of the demonstrations and strikes which are still breaking out from time to time. Political and economic instability is hanging like the sword of Damocles over the transition process.

The elections and subsequent deliberations on the new constitution require credibility and hence transparency. This is why it is important to have international election observers and to take external advice during the debate on the constitution. Tunisia can learn from other countries' experiences of these kinds of transition processes. Therefore it is important that the international community and the European Union in particular stand by Tunisia, not just by offering financial aid. Many Tunisians have expressed their wish to receive such help. There are three areas which are particularly important alongside the redefinition and reconstruction of governmental structures and institutions: developing the party structure, transforming the media and creating a stronger, more active civil society.

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The main problem for the planned elections on July 24, 2011 is the lack of political parties with credible, well-known leaders and robust structures. Ben Ali's system made it nigh on impossible for any kind of political evolution outside of the structures of the omnipresent RCD ruling party. The RCD had more than one million members, and party membership was a prerequisite for career

16 | Many companies are opposed to strikes and social demands on the part of their staff or the unemployed. Some employees are demanding changes in management. Cf. i.a. *Jeune Afrique*, No. 2618, March 13-19, 2011, 72 et seq.

advancement. The party permeated every area of Tunisian society. So it is hardly surprising that the dismantling of the RCD was one of the protesters' main demands both before and after Ben Ali's departure. The party was finally dissolved by court order on March 9, 2011, in line with a government proposal. Under Ben Ali there were several smaller opposition parties outside the RCD, including the "Democratic Progressive Party" (PDP) led by the lawyer Nejb Chebbi, the socialist Ettajdid and the "Democatic Forum for Labour and Liberties" (FDTL) under Mustapha Ben Jaafar. None of these parties had more than a few seats in a parliament overwhelmingly filled with RCD representatives. Chebbi and Ben Jaafar were members of Ghannouchi's first transitional government, but are not part of the present government.

The development of the political parties will continue over the next few months. Even now there are more than 50 new registered parties. Of course this number

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includes many unknown groups with only around a dozen founding members which will presumably have a short life. But one exception to this is likely to be the Islamist group Ennahdha. They were banned under the Ben Ali regime and their leaders were either forced into exile or disappeared into the country's jails, but now they are trying to rebuild. Political observers are divided over the real strength of the Islamists and their actual level of support among the population. But one thing is clear: Ennahdah has a wide supporter base. This was obvious when the former Ennahda leader, Rachid Ghannouchi, returned to Tunis on January 30, 2011 after 20 years of exile in London, to be met by a huge crowd at the airport. After Ben Ali's downfall, the Islamists are once again free to act, stirring up concerns among many Tunisians as to whether the country's established secularism (since the Bourguiba era) can be maintained. A political front line is starting to be drawn up around the place of Islam in Tunisia. The walls of houses in the centre of Tunis are often inscribed with slogans such as "Tunisian women are free and intend to stay free!" which are obviously directed at the Islamists' policies. This is why Islamist leaders have generally been restrained in their public statements.

OUTLOOK

On January 14, 2011 the Tunisians won a great victory. Within just four weeks the desire for freedom, democracy and dignity succeeded in toppling an apparently solid dictator from his pedestal. This showed other countries that the region's regimes are not as stable as was previously thought. Many people in other countries have followed the events in Tunisia with interest, sympathy and even excitement. Without the fall of Ben Ali, Egypt's President Mubarak would probably still be in power and there would have been no revolts in Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Syria. Other countries in the region have also reacted to the events in Tunisia by announcing reforms. Tunisia's revolution has started a wave of change across the whole Arab world. The path to change in Tunisia itself still holds many unknowns. The elections to the Constitutional Assembly are just a first step, and indeed it is still not sure whether these will actually take place on July 24, 2011 as announced.

But the changes in Tunisia have opened the door to new opportunities to strengthen Euro-Mediterranean relations which were often stymied in the past by the region's autocratic regimes. Both sides, the EU and Tunisia, now need to focus urgently on developing their partnership. This would also be an important sign that the EU is supporting Tunisia in its transition process.

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